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TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

VALLEY VULTURES

by MAX BRAND

John Ermine of the YELLOWSTONE

by FREDERIC REMINGTON

POWDERSMOKE PAY-OFF

by TOM WEST

25c THREE EXCITING ACTION NOVELS TRIPLE WESTERN APR. 1950

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THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 6, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION APRIL, 1950

VALLEY VULTURES

"Prince Charlie" Dexter rides to Monte Verde for a six-gun shoot-out with the renegades who have killed his kin, and trades bullet talk in a roaring showdown with a ruthless and greed-ridden crew of murderous land pirates!

MAX BRAND 11

JOHN ERMINE of the YELLOWSTONE

He was a white man who had been brought up by the Indians, but when peril rode roughshod over the prairie he became a fighting scout who battled to help the U. S. Cavalry smash the might of the marauding Apaches!

FREDERIC REMINGTON 56

POWDERSMOKE PAY-OFF

Gerald Smythe-Jones, the Englishman who is known as "Hyphen" Jones, takes over a cattle ranch near the Mexican Border—and immediately runs into a nest of rustlers which is ramrodded by a wily range renegade!

TOM WEST 98

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A friendly get-together for all hands, including announcements and letters

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A strange true story of the West taken from the annals of Indian warfare

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Ranger Ratch rides the danger trails to save a life and capture an outlaw

THE BEAR FACTS — **Simpson M. Ritter** — 161
A fact story which reveals why the Navajo Indians won't hunt ursine beasts

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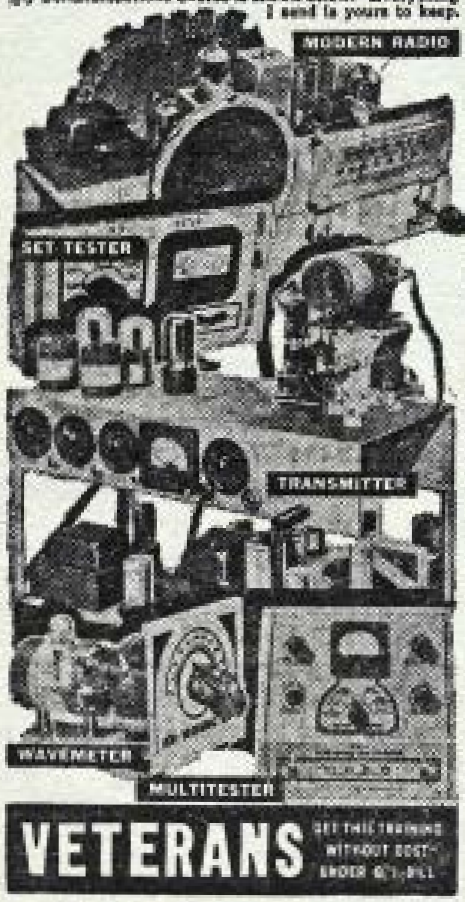

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The Trail Boss

A FRIENDLY GET-TOGETHER FOR ALL HANDS!

HOWDY, folks! It is good to see you Trail Hands back in camp, ringing close around the camp fire. Days are full of sunshine, zip and go in the West. But come sundown and the stars a-creeping out, nights get downright chilly.

Not so long ago I was down in Texas visiting the kinfolks. Though Texas has grown up a lot in recent years it is still a land of broad spaces and warm, old-fashioned neighbor friendliness.

Cattle, cotton and oil have built a fantastically rich empire out of this former wilderness frontier. But they didn't do it by themselves. It took real men to make Texas into what it is today.

Big shots are an old story in the Lone Star State from the Panhandle to the Gulf. Perhaps by modern standards some of them *were* ruthless, a little long on the me-first idea. But remember they lived in rugged times. And no matter when, where or what the frontier is or was, pioneering is no job for weaklings.

Empire Builders

Moreover, rough and salty as they often were, the big shots of the early West and particularly Texas for the most part had one thing in common. They were builders every one. Empire builders, if you like. Men of vision and knife-sharp business brains.

Those early cattle kings were not dreaming of the romance of the range, the cosy warmth of flickering camp fires and long nights under starry skies. They were thinking in terms of dollars and cents, of leaving their families in better financial security when they passed away, or being themselves well-off in their latter years.

They didn't think it was the Government's responsibility to do it for them. They did it for themselves.

The system may have had its faults. But it spawned a breed of men who stood on their own two feet and sat straight in the saddle. And it built the West into one of the richest and most important as well as most glamorous sections of our country.

Sixteen-Cent Acres

Yet back before the Civil War this country, the West, was not even considered worth *sixteen cents an acre* when the first plans for a trans-continental railroad were promulgated and the builders suggested land grants as a basis for re-imbursement for the expenses that would be incurred in stretching steel across the continent to San Francisco.

When Congress held a hearing on New Englander Asa Whitney's original proposal they treated it with good-natured indifference. Not that they thought that the idea of a railroad across he continent was not a good one. They were all for it. But they thought Asa was nuts. He proposed to value the western land the Government was to give him in payment for his railroad at a flat sixteen cents an acre.

Too little? Too little, my eye! Congress turned the proposition down because no one in the House at the time believed the great "desert" lands of the West were worth sixteen cents an acre—or ever would be.

Even earlier when the Mid-West was the frontier and young raliroads reaching out from Chicago south and across the mid-west prairies towards the Mississippi sought aid in grants of Federal land so redoubtable a statesman as Henry Clay declared, referring to one specific case, "This land is, I believe, about three hundred miles in length and but one hundred in breadth. It is utterly worthless just now . . . . nobody will go there and settle."

It looks, in retrospect, as if the pioneers

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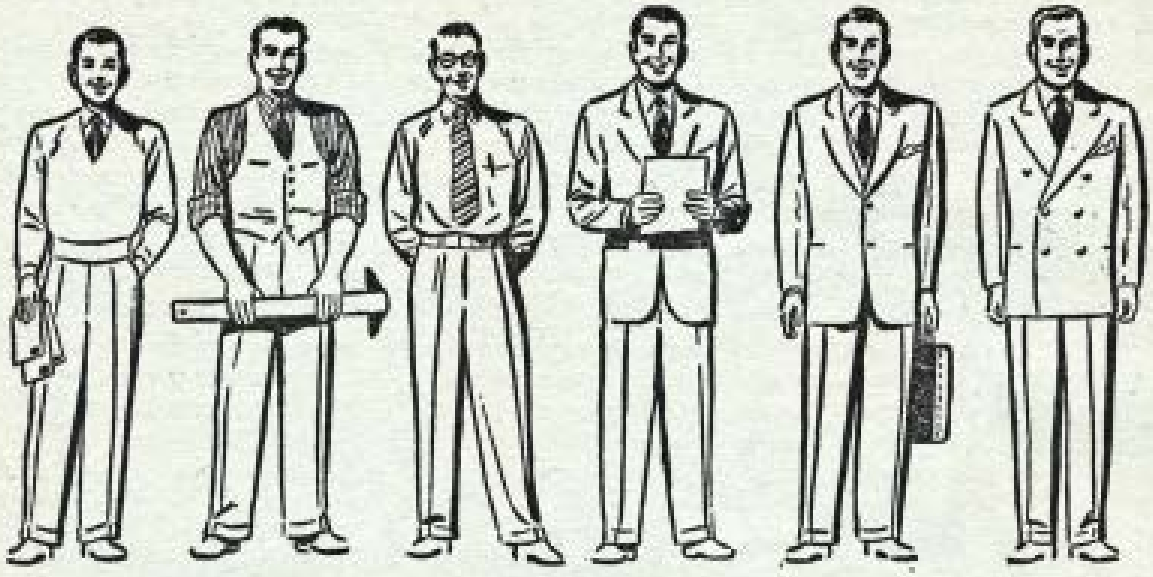

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THE TRAIL BOSS

(Continued from page 6)

were smarter than the politicians. Maybe they just had more gumption.

John Simpson Chisum

I got to talking one time about this willingness to try anything once and take a long shot gamble that was so characteristic of the pioneers with my old—and often windy—friend Poker Face Partridge. I figured the garrulous, lanky, long-legged ex-Texas top hand would have an appropriate tale to tell. He did. But he surprised me. He talked about John Simpson Chisum. And for a change, he told the truth.

Partridge had once worked for Chisum's famous Jingle-Bob spread in its latter days. And John Chisum, the storied cattle king, was one of Poker Face's few real life heroes of the West.

"Chisum got a lot of writin' up and almost notoriety you might say," Partridge explained, "on account of associating him with the outlaw William Bonney—Billy the Kid—and the famous Lincoln county war in New Mexico. The Chisum I knew was as smart a business man as the early cattle county ever had.

"Chisum knew cattle. He was the first of the pioneer Texas cattle barons I recollect with the vision to claim that some day beef steers from the range country would sell *by the pound* instead of so much a head."

Partridge was right. If selling Western cattle by the pound sounds like a simple and obvious statement today, in Chisum's time it was about as visionary as a trip to the moon. In those days cattle—the stringy, old longhorns—were driven hundreds of miles to market or to one of the advancing railheads of the long, thin lines of steel then beginning to finger out across the West. The animals were sold, horns, hide and hoof at so much a head with the price ranging from $10 up maybe to $20 or $25, according to market fluctuations, for the whole full grown animal.

Ahead of the Pack

"Yessir," Poker Face often declared, "cowboys and cattlemen alike hearing John Chisum predict range beef selling by the

pound thought the notion crazier'n women riding anything but side saddle. Chisum was way ahead of the pack. But he wasn't thinking of longhorns. He was thinking of the day when a western range breed would be developed that would turn out prime rib roasts and first class steaks not just Indian beef. In those days the high class, good-eating gentlemen's beef came from farm cattle raised in the East."

The introduction of Herefords, Black Angus and other primarily beef breeds of cattle to the vast western stock country in after years proved Chisum's point. Range cattle were and are sold by the pound—at higher prices per hundredweight than the old longhorns brought for a fully mature steer.

Though his own herds were longhorns, the only cattle breed the Southwest range knew at the time, John Chisum at the height of his career perhaps owned more cattle than any other single man in the United States—and in all probability in all the world. Well over a hundred thousand head of his famous Long Rail and Jingle-Bob brand used nearly half of New Mexico for their pasture, ranging from the Staked Plains westward to the Rio Grande and north and east to the Canadian river from his ranch headquarters at Bosque Grande beside a wide curve in the Pecos river some 40 miles north of the present town of Roswell, New Mexico.

The Pioneer Spirit

Chisum was born in Tennessee, itself then pretty much a frontier State, in 1824. The pioneer spirit as well as the business instincts that John Chisum inherited were also strong in his father, Claiborne Chisum. As early as 1837 Claiborne moved his family and all his household goods in a covered wagon across the wild, virtually untravelled lands beyond the Mississippi to settle just south of the Red river near what is now the town of Paris up close to the northern boundary of Texas.

Texas was a republic then, a new, frontier country still exulting over Sam Houston's less than a year old decisive defeat of Santa Ana at San Jacinto and rife with poignant memories of Crockett, Travis, Bowie and the others with them who had given their lives for Texas liberty at the bloody battle of the Alamo. It was not until 1845 that Texas joined the Union, and became a new state—on pretty much her own terms.

(Continued on page 154)

INSPECTOR MOON WON HIS BET AND THEN . . .

IN A LOFTY NEW YORK APARTMENT, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JIM MOON AND A MYSTERY WRITER, K.K. KYNE, ARGUE OVER THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE LATTER'S NEWEST "WHO DONE IT" WHEN . . .

. . . AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES

THAT EVENING

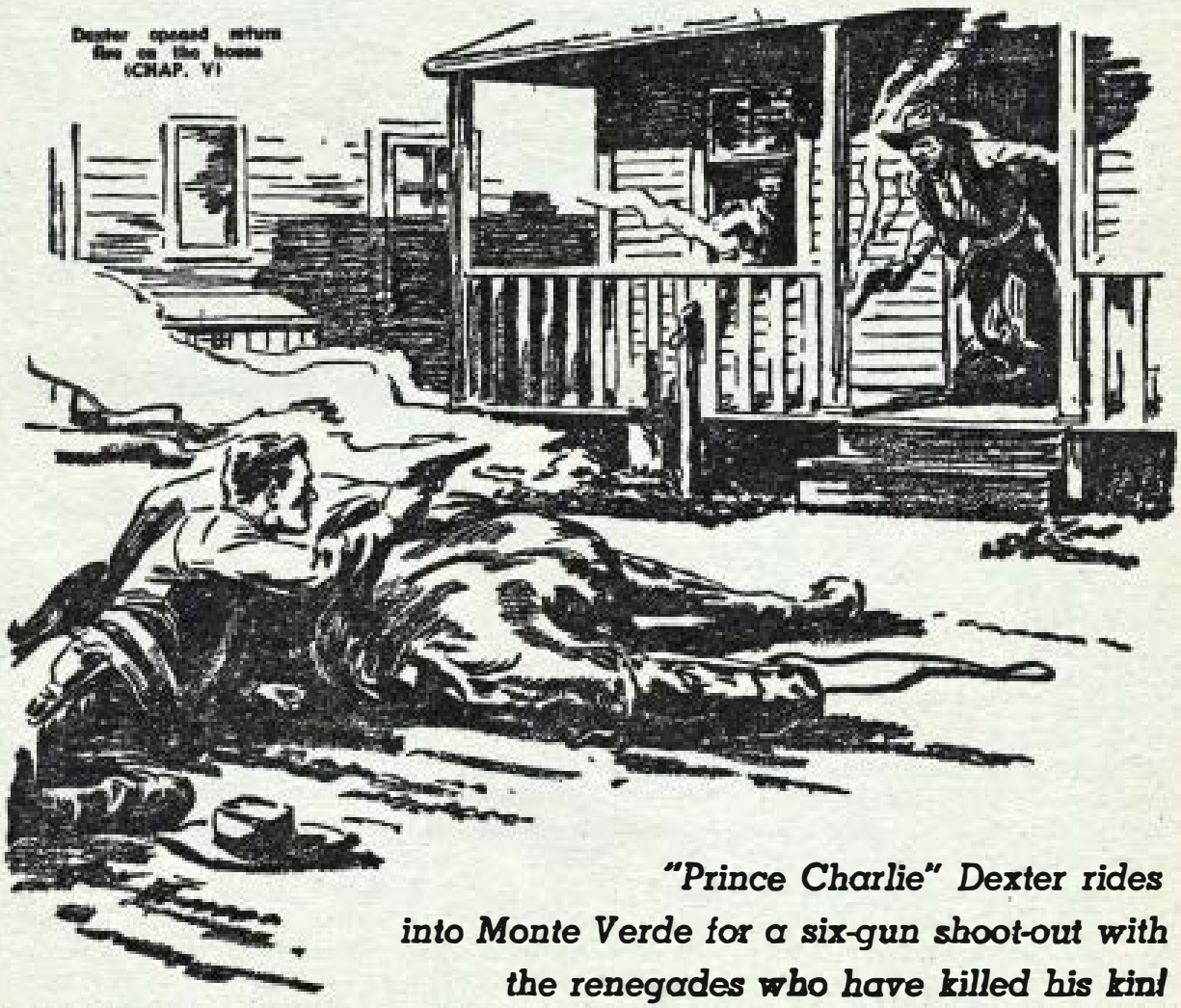
An Action Novel by **MAX BRAND**

VALLEY VULTURES

I

WHEN I first saw "Prince Charlie", I was standing on the veranda of the hotel at Monte Verde. Being new to the West, its ways and its people, naturally I was using my eyes, and yet I did not pick him out from the little crowd which was lounging there. He picked himself out for my attention by what he did, or rather, by what he failed to do.

I had turned from the men, just before the crisis, and was looking down into Dexter Valley, when the crash came. I heard a loud voice bawling out a curse, and I turned to see a man flounder down the steps



"Prince Charlie" Dexter rides into Monte Verde for a six-gun shoot-out with the renegades who have killed his kin!

and tumble in the dust of the roadway. He rolled almost under the heels of a mule team, but instead of sympathizing with his danger, that rough crowd burst into a roar of great-throated laughter until he picked himself up and they saw his face. I could see at a glance that he was well known to them and that they were sorry for their laughter.

"Who done that? Who tripped me?" he shouted, crimson with rage.

No one answered. When he got no reply, he bounded to the top of the steps and struck. I am sure that he did not deliberately select his man. He merely struck out at the nearest face.

It was Prince Charlie. Now that I noticed him, I marveled that I had not picked him out before, for he was a man in a million. He was dark enough to be a Mexican, with swarthy skin, silky black hair, and big, shadowy eyes. He was not handsome, and when I say that it was strange I had not noticed him before, I refer to a nameless air of distinction in which he was clothed, the haughty expression of his mouth, the indifferent calm in his dark eyes, the carriage of his head.

I suppose that he was fully fifty or sixty pounds lighter than the hulking bully who had struck him, but from the first glance I lost my sympathy for the smaller man and gave it to the aggressor. Something would happen to that fellow, in spite of his size, and I felt my face growing cold with apprehension.

"You're the one that tripped up my heels!" shouted the big man. "I'm gonna bust you in two. Who are you, anyway?"

Prince Charlie did not stir. "I am Charles Dexter," said he, in the most quiet and musical of voices.

"Dexter?" said the big man, then burst out into a bawling laughter. "You're one of the Dexters of Dexter Valley, I reckon!" he shouted, and this amused him so much that he rocked with mirth.

"Yes, I'm the last of the Dexters of Dexter Valley," Prince Charlie said.

The big fellow's mirth faded out as though he had a loaded gun shoved in his face. He looked about him.

"He says he's a Dexter!" he exclaimed. "Everybody knows that there ain't any of 'em left."

"When you come back," said Prince Charlie, "I'll tell you more about myself."

"I ain't goin'," said the other, scowling. "Where would I be goin'?"

"You're going," said Prince Charlie, "to get the gun you forgot to wear, today. I'll be waiting here for a longer talk, when you come back."

THIS he said so calmly that, for a moment, the significance of the thing did not dawn on me. But then I realized that he was inviting the big chap to go get a weapon and come back to pay for the blow with bullets. The other muttered something, and then went through the screen doors of the hotel, and we could hear his feet trampling up the stairs.

Every one waited out there on the veranda, never speaking except in a tense whisper now and then, and all nerves were on edge except those of young Dexter. He remained as calm as you please, and began to walk up and down in front of the door. He was a dapper-looking fellow, dressed in gray flannels and wearing spats. He had a little blue wild flower in his buttonhole to set him off, and a bow tie very neatly done up. But by his step, the narrowness of his hips, the solid look of him about the shoulders, I could see he was an athlete of much training, or else he was born fit and strong, as some men are.

We listened and listened for the step of big Jay Burgess—that was the name of the fighter, I learned afterward—to return. We waited, and after a few minutes a young fellow came around the corner of the veranda.

"Jay Burgess has gone nutty," he said to someone on the porch. "Whatcha think? I seen him lettin' himself down out of his window by a rope!"

Well, that was a sufficient explanation of what Burgess thought of his chances against young Mr. Dexter with guns; every one took in a deep breath, and while they were taking it a gray flash, like a cat, went by me and jumped to the ground at the end of the veranda. A moment later we heard a sudden rattling of hoofs departing from behind the hotel. Prince Charlie shrugged, and to my astonishment, not a word was said. There were murmurs here and there, but that was all.

The pause after the running away of Burgess did not last very long. New

CHARLIE DEXTER

interest was supplied by a girl who came hastily out through the front screen doors. I had seen her once or twice about the hotel before this, and had talked with her. She was Claudia Laffitter, the niece of the proprietress, and while she was no perfectly classical beauty, she was full of both humanity and character, with the step and carriage of an Indian; and brown hair and a bright boyish eye which in my estimation, only intensified her real femininity.

Now she walked straight from the door to this stranger.

"You're the fellow who says that he's Charlie Dexter?" she asked. Prince Charlie took off his hat, and he bowed with a sort of Latin grace.

"Yes," said he. "That is my name."

She looked him up and down.

"Come, come!" she said. "There never was a Dexter as small as you are! Besides, I knew Charlie Dexter when I was a little girl!"

The stranger met the challenge. "You knew me, and I knew you," he said, "when you used to call me Prince Charlie on your good days, and dago on your bad ones. And you were usually rather a bad little girl, Miss Laffitter."

BUT Claudia was by no means convinced by this last display of intimate knowledge. "You could have learned about that," she said. "A lot of people knew what we called each other. And Prince Charlie at twelve was the handsomest lad in the valley, and not two inches shorter then than you are now, ten years later! Do you mean to stand right there before me and tell me that you are Charles Dexter?"

"I stand right here before you," he replied with a smile, "and tell you that I am Charles Dexter."

She pointed off the end of the veranda.

"If you're the true Charles Dexter," said she, "you have a right to every acre of land in that valley."

He bowed again. "I have a right to every acre of land in that valley!" he replied.

"The Livingstons, and the Crowells, and the Dinmonts, and the Bensons, they're no more than interlopers, according to what you say," she went on, still staring at him.

He repeated the names after her:

"The Livingstons, Crowells, Dinmonts, and Bensons; the Muirs, Lodges, and Dressers and a great many more are no more than interlopers—and murderers, Claudia."

She flinched a little, then gave her head a violent shake. A second later she turned to all the crowd, and her bright eyes swept across my face, among the rest.

"I'll tell you what, people," said Claudia Laffitter, "we all have a right to question him and we all have a right to make out for sure that he's really a Dexter. Because, if he is, there's going to be something redder than paint running yonder in the valley before long —just as red as it ran ten years ago!"

She looked back to Dexter.

"You know that we have a right to question you?"

"Certainly," said he. "I'd welcome it."

"Very well," she said curtly. "We'll get on with the thing. We'll have a little jury to sit on the case. Let me see—who shall we have on it?"

"Hold on, Claudia," said a big, iron-faced fellow. "I dunno that you got a claim to run all of this here affair."

She whirled on him. "Why haven't I?" she demanded.

"You've got no more right than others," said he. "If our friend here claims that he's Charlie Dexter, you know perfectly well that it's the business of everybody here to get at the truth."

"Was my father Ben Laffitter, or was he not?" asked the girl.

"Of course he was," said the big man.

"Then answer me this, Uncle Jed Raymond," she went on in a clear, strong voice. "Did Ben Laffitter die for the Dexters, that night of the betrayal?"

"Aye, honey," said Jed Raymond. "We know how he died. But this job of tryin' this stranger on what he says he is, oughta go to older heads than yours, Claudia."

The girl frowned. "All right," she agreed finally. "But I'm going to be in on this."

"Aye, Claudia," he answered rather abruptly. "You're most generally in on everything, so far as I can see. Now what I suggest is that we get two people from each side, and one person that ain't on either side. That'll be a committee of five. If three out of the five can agree that this is Charles Dexter, then we'll say so, and I'll stand by the decision, for one."

"How does that sound to you people?" said the girl, turning to the spectators.

Several voices spoke up quickly, and by acclaim the first four were quickly chosen. Claudia Laffitter, and big Uncle Jed Raymond were selected to represent the Dexter clan. The two opposed to the Dexter faction were a florid man of middle age whom they called "Dandy" Pete Bullen, and a small, lean man of some fifty years, named Marvin Crowell.

When the four had been selected, the crowd looked about for a neutral, and Claudia, looking toward me, said suddenly, "Why, everybody who lives around here has been on one side or the other, nearly all his life. But here's a stranger who hardly knows Dexter Valley from Monte Verde. This is Mr. Oliver Dean, an engineer from the East who has come out here for his health. Perhaps he'll help us make up our minds?"

Young Prince Charlie turned and gave me a single glance.

"A perfectly acceptable choice to me," he said slowly. So that was how I was dragged into the grim affair that was to grow out of this day's work.

II

WE ALL went into the hotel—that is to say, Dandy Pete Bullen, Marvin Crowell, Uncle Jed Raymond, the girl, I, and the man who claimed that he was Charles Dexter. When we had settled down around a table in a corner room, Uncle Jed Raymond said, "Friends, we might as well start right in. You say, partner, that you're the real Charles Dexter, eh?"

"That's my claim," replied the young fellow.

"Why d'you want us to find out about you?" said Uncle Jed, very bluntly. "Why don't you give your proofs to the police, say? If they believe you, then we'd be more likely to."

"You mean that I should show my claims down there in the town of Dexter, where they have a Livingston for sheriff, and a Benson for judge? What sort of a judgment do you think they would make when the admission of my claims would wipe out their estates? As for proving who I am to you people, you can imagine why I want to do that. If you declare that I'm really Charles Dexter, then at least half of the people in this part of the world will line up on

The tall man emerged from behind a rock and walked to meet his death (CHAP. IX)

my side and take my part."

"And war will start again!" broke in old Marvin Crowell. "It sounds to me like you're here huntin' for an excuse to make trouble."

"As your brother, Manly, was looking for trouble when he killed Jefferson Dexter, my father," Prince Charlie reminded Crowell.

Though this was said without heat, Crowell exploded. "It ain't true. Everybody knows that Manuel Scorpio done that killing."

"Manuel Scorpio killed several others of my family," said Prince Charlie, "but not my father. I saw that killing."

"Where were you when you seen?" demanded Dandy Pete.

"I was in the door of the tank house—"

"Hold on! Hold on!" said Uncle Jed. "What time of day was that?"

"It was a quarter past three in the morning. I had gone down to get—"

"Wait a minute," put in Claudia. "We can settle this case in a simpler way than all that. If he's Charles Dexter, he owns that valley—"

"Not even if he's Charles Dexter he don't," said Crowell firmly. "It ain't been proved that the Dexter land grant was ever—"

"There's no use arguing about that," replied the girl. "Let it go, Mr. Crowell, please. You know that if he's Charles Dexter, he'll get so many people behind him that a part of his family's land will come back to him; and even a part of it would mean millions, now."

She turned to the boy. "How long ago did you leave Dexter Valley?" she asked.

"On the night we were betrayed by Manuel Scorpio."

"Where did you go?"

"Half a dozen places, since that time."

"Well, recently, then?"

"In college, for the last four years."

"You knew that you were the heir to all of the Dexter claims?"

"Of course."

"And yet you let ten years go by without putting in a claim for what was yours?"

THIS question had so much point to it that I leaned forward a little to hear the answer. Dexter replied readily. "Until I was a man, there was no use in coming back here to be swallowed alive by Scorpio, or some other of the family's enemies."

"But Scorpio drowned in the river, that night."

"There never was any proof," said the boy.

"He's never been heard of since."

"Of course he hasn't. He's probably lying low, though, and using a new name. He would have been a madman to go about this part of the country, where so many of the people were ready and willing to make an end of him!"

"Aye!" broke in Uncle Jed Raymond. "More'n ready and willing, as a matter of fact."

He nodded, and his face was grim. The girl shook her head.

"It still looks strange to me," she said. "Is there anybody who went off with you from Dexter Valley, or do you want us to believe that a twelve-year-old boy rode out of that place all by himself?"

"Phil Anson, the cowpuncher, rode with me."

"Aye, Phil disappeared!" broke in Uncle Jed, with a sudden light of belief in his eyes.

"Sure he disappeared," said Crowell. "The river got him as it did Scorpio. That's what I think happened to Phil Anson!"

"You can tell him what you think, in a few minutes," said the boy. "He's coming up here on the stage that's already overdue."

"Then why didn't you tell us before?" Claudia demanded.

"Well, in twelve years Anson has changed in appearance almost as much as I have. You may want him to prove his identity also. Even if you accept him as the real Philip Anson, still you may say that I'm an impostor, that I simply have hired this man to help me in my intrigue. Philip Anson is hardly conclusive proof."

This quiet and logical speech, admitting instantly all the points that the opposition could bring forward, made a great impression on all of us. Bullen and Marvin Crowell began to scowl at the table.

"We'll have to have a lot more proof," Bullen said. "Lemme hear out of you

what you was doing that night of the betrayal, as you call it. What time d'you go to bed?"

"I didn't go to bed at all," said Dexter.

"Why?"

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I was afraid, because my cousin, Marshall Dexter, had been found dead the day before, with the mark on his forehead."

"What sort of mark?" asked Claudia, cold and calm.

"It was rather like a clumsy letter 'M', with the last stroke instead of curling up, prolonged straight downward. It was a queer-looking letter. It was drawn on the forehead of my dead cousin in charcoal—or something that looked like charcoal."

"Go on!" said Claudia.

"The morning after that killing, when we waked up, we found the same sign on the door of the house, and on every door where we were sleeping. I felt, and my father felt, too, that whoever had murdered Marshall now intended to murder him and then murder me."

"D'you find out anything what the sign meant?" asked Bullen.

"Yes. Just at the end, my father guessed. He looked in the big dictionary, and confirmed his guess that it is an astronomical sign—the sign for the constellation called the Scorpion."

"And then you thought of Manuel Scorpio?" asked the girl.

"Of course we thought of him then. Scorpio is the Latin for Scorpion."

"Suppose that you describe Manuel Scorpio?" she asked.

THE boy said, "He was a slenderly made Mexican—at least, I suppose from his name that he was a Mexican. But his skin was as white as any American's, and he spoke perfect English. He was a good puncher; and the boys in the bunkhouses were fond of him because he played on an accordion and sang songs to them."

"Had anything happened to make you think that Scorpio hated your family?"

"Nothing that had happened up to then," said Dexter, "but years before, when he was a youngster, my father suspected him of stealing a horse. He wouldn't have him arrested. That was not my father's way. But he had Manuel tied to a post and gave him a terrible flogging with a quirt."

"Did you see that happen?" asked the girl.

"Yes, and so did you," said he.

At this, Claudia put both her hands over her face.

"Yes," she said. "I never shall forget."

"And then we discovered that Manuel had not stolen the horse after all. My father gave him fifty dollars and thought that everything would be all right. But on this night, when he had identified the 'M'-shaped mark on the forehead of Marshall Dexter as the sign of Scorpio, the constellation, he remembered the flogging and decided that perhaps Manuel Scorpio had been nursing a grudge all this time."

"Then why didn't your father do something about it?" asked the girl.

"He did. He called Scorpio into the library. I listened at the door, because I liked Manuel and hoped that nothing would happen to him. I was sure that no one so young could have murdered Marshall Dexter."

"Well?" said the girl, impatiently. And we all were hanging on the next words.

"My father talked to him—not about the murder though. He told Manuel that he was very pleased with his work and intended to give him a piece of good land down by the river, so that he could set up by himself and be in a position to marry pretty little Rosita. Manuel thanked him, with tears in his voice. I was sure that Manuel was honest; and my father was sure, too, though it turned out that he was wrong. Because it was Scorpio's sign, after all, that had been put on the doors and on the forehead of the dead man."

"Aye," said Uncle Jed Raymond. "We all found that out, when it was too late."

"Go on," said Claudia, "and tell us what happened that night to you, afterward?"

"Well, I was telling you that I could not sleep because I was frightened. Finally I made up my mind that I was a coward. I decided that I would walk

out into the dark, just to test my nerves. I got out to the open yard, and then decided that I would go into the tank house and get a drink of buttermilk. While I was drinking in the dark I heard a door slam and a couple of voices raised. I ran to the door, and there I saw my father on the side steps of the house, and below him was Manly Crowell—"

"It's a lie!" burst out Marvin Crowell, as he heard his brother's name mentioned.

Young Dexter looked at him for a considerable moment.

"And below him was Manly Crowell," he repeated. "Manly Crowell pulled out a revolver and fired. And my father, who was standing there in his nightgown, reached out at the empty air and fell down the steps."

At this point I no longer doubted that this was young Dexter, the rightful heir to the rich valley lands.

"And then?" said Uncle Jed Raymond.

"Well," said the boy, "then I went into a sort of blind panic, because as soon as that revolver shot sounded, there was a general cracking of firearms. I started for the house, but before I got to it, Phil Anson, the puncher, grabbed me.

"'This is no place for you, kid!' he said, and took me on the run out to the barn and there we saddled a couple of horses and he made me ride off with him. I was rather confused. But he said something about a betrayal, and Manuel Scorpio, and he kept me riding all through that night.

"By the time morning came, we were at the head of the valley. And there we rested. By noon, a report came our way that Manuel Scorpio, helped out by a lot of people who had been renting land from my father, had risen in the night and had wiped out the entire Dexter family. They said that even I had been drowned in the river; that Scorpio had disappeared in the same way; and that Ben Laffitter had died, fighting for my family."

Just then we heard the noise of horses and the groan of a heavy brake.

"There's the stage now," said Uncle Jed Raymond. "I'll go and get Phil Anson, if he's aboard of it."

"He's changed a good deal," said Dexter. "He's—I'd better meet him."

"You'd better?" cried Raymond. "I'll tell a man that you had not better! I knew Phil Anson as well as I knew my own brother, in the old days. And I'd recognize him, I reckon, if he was a thousand years old!"

BIG Raymond was back almost at once with a tall fellow of middle age, whose left leg and arm seemed to be half helpless as though from the aftermath of paralysis. But there was no doubt that Raymond had recognized Anson at the first glance. As they came through the doorway, side by side, big Raymond asked, "Phil, d'you know this man?"

"I've been with him for ten years," Anson said. "I ought to know him."

"Then tell us his name," demanded Raymond.

"His name's Charles Dexter," said Philip Anson.

Raymond went up and shook Dexter cordially by the hand.

"I wouldn't believe till I had to," said he. "But you know that I knew your father, and that I fought for his family, and the reason that I left Dexter Valley was because the sneakin' murderers down there made things too hot for me. I been up here in Monte Verde like a hawk on a perch, waitin' for a time to get back, and now I reckon that the time has come!" He turned to the others. "Now, gents, you've heard enough, I take it. I'd like to have the vote of you people on whether this here is Charles Dexter, or ain't. Speakin' personal, I guessed ten minutes ago that this boy is straight."

"It's Charles Dexter!" cried Claudia. She had such a thrill in her voice as did a man good to hear.

"He ain't any Dexter for me," said Dandy Bullen sullenly.

"What about you, Crowell? You had oughta be able to see the nose on your face, even if Bullen won't!"

"If I can see the nose of my face," said Crowell, "I can see that he ain't a Dexter. He's too small, like I said before. He ain't any more a Dexter than I am."

"Then it's two and two," said Uncle Jed Raymond. "Now there, you, stranger—Oliver Dean—what you say to us about this here job?"

I had hardly spoken a word during the entire interview and trial. I hardly wanted to speak one now. If I voted for the boy, he would be established in the eyes of the vast majority of these hardy mountain men, as the legitimate Dexter. And trouble would start in Dexter Valley, to be sure! I gave the boy a last look of inquisition. He met my glance with an unaffected steadiness.

"You are Charles Dexter," said I.

The two of the Valley faction glowered at me.

"Stranger," said Bullen, "you've stepped yourself into pretty tight shoes. Look out that you don't get some corns and chilblains from this here!" He turned to Anson. "I'll remember this and you," he added savagely.

"Remember and be damned," Anson advised him.

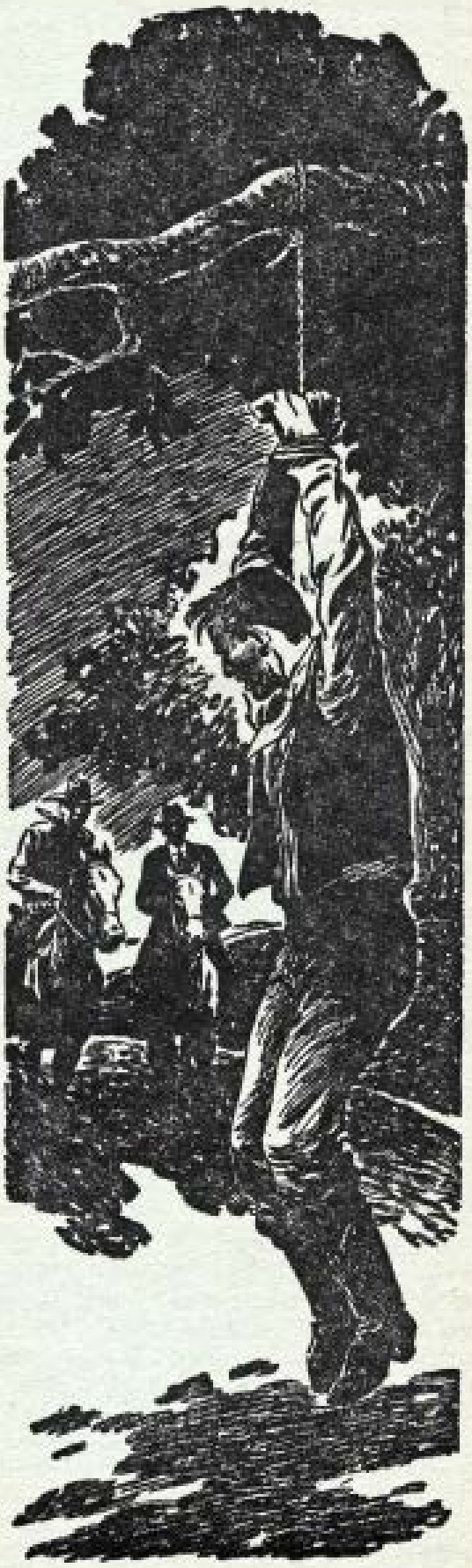
"Come on, Dandy," said Crowell. "Come along with me, and get out of this."

He took Dandy Bullen by the arm and they were starting together toward the door, when suddenly a loud screeching cry rang and bit against my eardrums. I turned with the others to see Crowell pointing out with a rigid arm.

THERE, upon the central panel of the door, traced large and bold, was a character that looked like the letter "M" with the last stroke not curling up, as usual, but prolonged downward. It was done in black—charcoal perhaps—and I knew it was what they had been talking about—the sign of Scorpio.

Dexter took charge. Standing there with one elbow lightly drooped over the back of a chair, he said, "I don't think that any one in this room wrote the letter on the door. It must have been someone who overheard part of our talk. It was Scorpio himself. He was standing yonder, outside—"

He turned as he spoke, and snatched the door open. But the hall was empty. We went out into it and thoroughly



There was Slade Peterson, tied up by the wrists to the tree (CHAP. VIII)

scanned the dust on the floor and the window, and the ground outside the window.

"Is that a man climbing down the slope?" asked Bullen suddenly.

We all stared. This window opened toward the big, blue valley. In a group of shrubs far down the hillside, I thought that I saw something move—yes, and then out stepped a brindled yearling heifer!

"We've been acting like calves!" cried Bullen. "We oughta scatter around and tell the folks that Scorpio has been here, and ask if they've seen anybody like him."

"A good chance I would have that you or any of your kind would spread the news or try to take Scorpio for me!" said Dexter bitterly.

"Young feller," said Bullen, scowling, "are you lookin' for trouble?"

Dexter laughed. "Why else do you think that I've come here, man?" he demanded. "Trouble? Of course I want trouble. I expect to have trouble with every meal, every day, until I've got back what's mine, and what belongs to my family!"

"Them that wants trouble, they mostly get it," answered Bullen.

"Go spread the news of that," said Dexter. "Go down to the valley and tell your family and tell your friends. I'm back here. You've set Scorpio on my trail. You've lost no time. So I know that down in your hearts you admit I'm the real Dexter. Very well, tell them I'm back, and tell them to stand on their guard because I intend to come and take what is my own!"

Marvin Crowell piped up, "You're witnesses, all of you," said he. "Here's this boy openly threatenin' the lives and the properties of the honest folks that are livin' down yonder in Dexter Valley! If ever they's any violence, the law has got a right to know what's been said this day!"

"Charlie," said Philip Anson, "I'm mighty tired. Send them away, will you?"

"Aye, I'll send them away," said the boy. "But I want them to take down a word that some of their friends ought to know, and that they ought to know themselves. I'm going to go peacefully to every house in that valley, and I'm going to leave a summons to get out of my way and turn over to me the things that they know are mine."

"Are you a fool?" broke in Jed Raymond. "You—one boy—agin' a hundred or so fightin' men?"

"I have my cause," said the boy. "And a good cause is a better thing than an army, I should say. I'll serve notices on them all. Then I'll begin to act."

When the pair who represented the Dexter Valley people had disappeared, Dexter turned and shook hands with me.

"Mr. Dean," he said. "It took a good deal of courage for you to commit yourself in a quarrel to which you're a stranger. I want to thank you."

He gave my hand a good grip, but I was glad to get away from him outside the hotel, and let the clean open air blow on me. I felt, in fact, as though I had been walking through a dream.

EARLY after supper I went up to my room in the hotel. Because of what was to happen, I must describe the position of this room. It stood in the second story of the building, directly over the small room in which we had held the conference. Like it, it had a window to the east and one to the north; and when I went up to it this evening, I heard voices through the thin partition to my right and eventually I thought that I distinguished the calm tones of young Dexter.

I could not make out his words, for he was apparently speaking very gently. The man with whom he was talking, however, sometimes cried out so that I distinctly heard the words. "Time! Time! Time!" impatiently repeated. Later as I sat before the northern window, I heard another word of a different nature which was brought out with an equal loudness, and which thoroughly chilled me, hearing it. For it was clearly the word "death", as though the speaker were using several sentences, each of which ended on that dismal word.

I told myself that it must be some invalid, like myself, in that room, complaining, as I was myself in the habit of complaining, against the prospect of a too early death. At last, after lying

for a long time staring into the darkness, I fell asleep.

Out of this sleep I wakened with a sense that something was fumbling at the door of my room. In another instant, there was a faint rushing sound, and a freshening in the gust of air which blew across my bed. I remembered that my vote had been the one which turned opinion in the favor of young Dexter's honesty. Perhaps I would be made a victim next!

Fear turned me to ice. I could not move.

Next, I heard the most hideous voice that it is possible to imagine. It was half speaking, half whispering, "Charlie! Charlie!"

I could endure no more. I cried out, "Who's there?"

No answer came. Then I heard a heavy, slumping sound, as of a body falling heavily. Instantly I scratched a match, and holding it in the cup of my shaking hand, directed the light toward the source of the last noise I had heard.

There I saw a crowning horror. The tall man, Philip Anson, had sunk to his knees. His hands were both clasped against his throat from the base of which blood was running fast. His face was contorted to a mask of terror and horror, and upon his forehead, boldly worked in black, was the sign of Scorpio.

III

I LIGHTED the lamp at the head of my bed, and ran to the wounded man. Just then he fell over on his side and began to kick and struggle in what I was convinced was his last convulsion. I had to have help, and now I remembered the voices which I had heard in the room to my right. I was convinced that Anson, wounded by the murderer, Scorpio, in his agony had mistaken my door for that of young Dexter, who must be adjoining. I ran, therefore, to the next room. My hand had barely rapped against the door when it was jerked open.

"What is it?" said Dexter. "What is it, Mr. Dean?"

I managed to point toward my room and exclaim something about poor Anson. Like a flash, Dexter sprang across the passage and into my room. I followed and closed the door behind me as Dexter knelt beside the dying man.

Dying he was, for I came just in time to see the boy strongly draw away the hands with which Anson seemed trying to strangle himself. For one long fraction of a second, the boy looked at the wound, and then released his grip on the wrists of Anson. The latter, seeming to know that death was coming rapidly upon him, was spending the last effort of his strength in speaking, or trying to speak. In the vastness of his desire, the veins swelled upon his forehead.

Dexter spoke to his friend as though nothing of importance were taking place.

"You will have to relax, Phil," he said. "Let me wipe your lips. Don't try to speak, but whisper. That will cause less effort and the sound has a better chance of coming through. Or, better still, write what you have to say. Here—I'll support you. Write it on the floor, Phil, old fellow!"

He supported the dying man around the shoulders, but Anson, thus raised, seemed incapable of understanding what was suggested to him. He continued to strain and struggle to speak. Perhaps it was the more raised position that cleared the throat of Anson for an instant as suddenly, against my expectation, I heard a ghastly voice break out.

"Scorpio—revenge—" he screamed aloud. He made a further effort, but could only soundlessly gibber, though frenzy was blackening his face.

Dexter seemed to realize that he had heard the last words which poor Philip Anson would ever utter. With one arm beneath the man, he stood up, raising the body as he did so, firmly embraced in that single arm. He rose with the large weight of that grown man, as easily as I would rise with a new-born infant in my arms.

So standing erect, with the lamplight gleaming on him, with the blood of Anson running over his own breast, he lifted his free hand to the sky and to God.

"Phil," he said, "you see me and you hear me. I shall never rest until I have

found Scorpio, and killed him, exactly as he killed you! Do you hear me? Does that make you feel quieter, and happier?"

A last convulsion seized Philip Anson. His head moved violently from side to side. Then, as if stabbed by a fresh stroke, his body became limp and he hung loosely over the arm of the boy.

By this time the slamming of my door, and the shriek of the wounded man, had roused the hotel, and steps came running up the hall.

"Close the door and keep them out," said the boy to me, over his shoulder.

I closed the door and locked it. Dexter placed the body on the floor and was straightening it into a position of composure when the first of the inquirers came to my door. I heard the excited cry of Claudia Laffitter.

"What's happened? Mr. Dean! Are you there? Are you all right?"

"I'm here and perfectly safe," I called, and glanced back toward Dexter.

"You may talk," said he.

"Then what was the horrible screech? Was it only a bad dream?" asked Claudia Laffitter.

"Look here!" said a man's voice in the hall. "There's blood on the floor."

"Yes," said Claudia. "There's blood. Mr. Dean, you must open the door. Something has happened."

I answered, "Philip Anson has been stabbed. He came to my room, mistaking it for Dexter's. He is dead, now, on the floor of my room, and Dexter is with him. If there's an officer of the law in the town, he had better be sent for before any one is admitted or anything disturbed!"

Then she said a very odd thing, which slid through my brain like a cold gleam of steel.

"He's dead—so quickly!"

It was as if she had expected his death as a matter of course, and only the suddenness of it surprised her.

I heard her tell the others in a few words what had happened, and urge them to go to the sheriff, who had put up at the hotel that same night.

A MOMENT later, Sheriff Thomas Winchell arrived, and of course, the door had to be opened to him at once. This man of the law had a good reputation among the mountain men because he kept peace among all the rough canyons and the ravines of his district. Yet I don't suppose that a less formidable man ever appeared. He was both very little, and very faded. The very blue of his eyes had faded, and his hair was faded to rust and gray also. He had a thin streak of mustache on each side of his upper lip but I cannot say that this made him appear more manly.

Indeed, I hardly noticed the sheriff, at first, being busy looking at the big, rough-looking fellows who accompanied him. The first time he really attracted my attention was when I saw the little man lean over and pick up a corner of the rug, very much like a housewife feeling the texture of some material.

"Tut-tut!" he said. "Pretty well spoiled, I'm afraid!" Then he turned to the young man. "So you're little Charlie Dexter?" he said.

"Yes, Sheriff Winchell," the other replied.

The sheriff went up and held out his almost tiny paw. Dexter shook it, as Winchell still nodded and bobbed his head from side to side.

"I'm glad to see you, but I ain't glad to see you in this here room, Charlie," said he. "But to think of you comin' back here, and to think of there bein' a Prince Charlie agin for the boys to look up to and the girls to admire! Why, it'll put a lot of life into things around here, lemme tell you. They'll be a good many fires will burn brighter, and a good many guns will be flashin' for Prince Charlie, to my way of thinkin'. But welcome home, Charlie. A good, hearty welcome to you."

After this rambling speech, which appeared to me a little more out of place than any words I ever have heard, he went on with his investigation. He took his time, I must say. He went across the hall, and he entered the room where Anson had been sleeping when he was stabbed. There he moved about, and looked, and examined with a pocket glass, certain smudges of the blood. Then he looked at the window sill and bobbed his head up and down as usual.

"There's where he come in at, and he must abeen like a cat walkin' up a wall,"

said the sheriff. He pointed out a flake of paint gone at one spot, and at another a projecting nail from which the rust had been newly ground off.

"You got an eye in your head, sheriff!" said one of the men, admiringly.

"Oh, I got a mighty bad eye," said the sheriff. "But there's such a thing as findin' what you wanta see, and there's such a thing as good strong glasses to help out them that has weak eyes." Then he asked that Claudia Laffitter be sent for, and she came, looking pale and hard-set, as though she were bracing her nerves.

"Claudia, dear," said he, "will you tell me what kind of luggage this poor Anson fellow was carryin' with him when he came to the hotel?"

"Just a suitcase and a small black bag."

"I see a suitcase, but I don't see a little black bag," said the sheriff. He turned to Dexter. "You tell me, Prince Charlie," said he, "you tell me what might be in that little black bag that people would want to steal it for?"

Prince Charlie answered in his unemotional voice. "In that little black bag were all the proofs of my birth and enough to convince any court in the land that I am Charles Dexter."

"Ah-ah-ah!" said Winchell. "But we all take that for granted already. And who would be murderin' a man for that?"

When the sheriff had finished inside the house, he went outside of it to try to follow the back trail of the murderer, and young Dexter went with him. Before he left I touched his arm.

"If I can be of any use to you—" said I. "About arrangements, I mean?"

He turned and looked at me. In ways, he had the most unsympathetic eye in the world. But now he said. "You're very kind, Mr. Dean. You can make the arrangements at the cemetery and get a coffin. I have something to do besides burying dead men."

SO I WENT off to execute my mission as soon as I had nervously swallowed a small breakfast. After arranging for a coffin, I proceeded to the burial ground on the outskirts of Monte Verde. In an open, grassy place in a corner I selected the site of Anson's grave and hired a strong lad at the nearest house to dig the hole for me. Then I went back to town.

There was excitement ahead of me, I saw at once. For several men and boys were in view running at full speed toward the hotel; and when I came in sight of it, I saw a crowd of forty or fifty people in front of the veranda surrounding five horsemen. I knew without being told that this interest must have something to do with young Charles Dexter.

"Who are they?" I asked one of the crowd a few moments later.

"That's Judge Benson, with Clay Livingston's boys," came the answer.

"Will he come out?" some one asked.

"Sure—if he's a fool!" said another.

"He'd come out in spite of all the men in Dexter Valley," said a third.

Of course they were speaking of Charlie Dexter. Then a fellow bawled out, "There's the man who's Dexter's friend! That's him—the little feller."

[Turn page]

Judge Benson turned toward me on his horse. He was of middle age, with the face of a statesman of the grim ancient school.

"You're a friend to the young impostor, are you?" he began.

This was a little too much for me. "I'm a friend of Charles Dexter," I answered. "And so are the rest of these people. They're all friends of Charles Dexter! Ask them—let me see which one of them denies it!"

The judge was a match for that question.

"So am I the friend of Charles Dexter—the poor dead boy who lost his life ten years ago. But I ask you, point-blank, how you dare to encourage the pretensions of an impostor—and you a stranger to the community! How long have you known the young reprobate?"

"Less than one day," I told him.

The judge smiled in his contempt.

"I thought so," said he. "Credulous fools cause half of the misery in the world! If this young criminal dares to show himself to me—"

But at that moment Dexter himself appeared on the veranda. Benson jerked his head around as the crowd disappeared from between them. I saw the judge straighten in his saddle. The four young knights with him stiffened likewise, and I saw a contemptuous smile appear on the lips of one of them.

There was a moment of silence, during which the judge stared at the boy. Then he broke out in a scornful voice, "So you're the true Charles Dexter, are you? You?"

"My name is Charles Dexter," said he.

"So I hear you say. Do you know what the law says must be done to those who steal names?"

"My dear Judge Benson," said Dexter, "perhaps you need to be on a horse to ask that question, but I don't need to be on a horse to answer it."

"We've stood enough!" exclaimed one of the Livingston boys. They started forward, pouring around the judge. Dexter did not move.

"You'd better keep your young men in hand, Judge Benson," he warned.

The judge did not wait. "Slade, Harry, Joe, Ben!" he shouted. "Get back here and don't start trouble. Keep behind me and out of the way!"

They reined in their horses. They were flushed with anger, and fairly growling their rage.

"All four, and on horseback!" said Dexter, with his shadowy smile. "Four to one! Four to one! But what big, strapping boys they've grown to be. Worth something, I dare say, if they could be sold by the pound!" He singled out one of the four young giants with his eye. "You're Slade, of course," he said. "And you'll be remembering the day when I blacked your eye for you at the swimming pool, Slade? Remember it, old fellow. And when you come again, don't come with four, but with fourteen!"

Perhaps there was something childish in this taunt, but the reference to such a particular instance of the past had its decided point. I think it was this moment that decided Monte Verde to believe in Charles Dexter.

The judge was naturally in a fury. "My lad," he said, "I advise you to leave this community and betake yourself to smaller crimes. You'll find this a dangerous atmosphere."

Dexter smiled. "My dear judge," he retorted. "I don't aspire toward the crimes by which you've distinguished yourself. I, for one, never expect to murder my landlord in order to keep the rent that belongs to him."

"You infernal young puppy!" cried the judge. "There never was a Dexter who wouldn't make two of you!"

Dexter deliberately walked down the steps and sauntered slowly toward that row of horses' heads. He folded his hands behind his back, and looked from one rider's face to the next.

"You see, however," said he, "that I keep the old Dexter characteristics. I never hunt in couples, Judge, and I never run from packs of village dogs!"

IV

THE judge called out loudly to the Livingston boys to keep their hands from their guns and to bear back. I suppose that he had come up there hoping to brush the boy before him by weight of numbers and authority. But

now he must have seen what was in the air. The tables were turned.

"Whatever nonsense may be in your mind," said he to Dexter, "there are courts of law in which you can present your claims."

"For instance," said the boy, "in the court where you preside?" He smiled contemptuously. "Besides," he went on, "as you well know, the man who could have given the best testimony on my behalf has been murdered and the satchel containing my documents has been stolen from him."

"Come, come, come!" said the judge. "What documents could there have been?"

"What I had in my pockets when I left home. There was a picture, for instance, of my mother and myself, with a few words written by myself under the face of the picture."

"A very simple matter," said the judge, "for any one to get a picture of poor Mrs. Dexter and her dead boy. What would it prove?"

"It would prove that my handwriting was simply the boyish forerunner of the handwriting which I use now. Any handwriting expert could see the truth at a glance. Besides, in my pockets there were other things, such as a key to the cellar door, and another key for the wire run where I kept my rabbits."

"A snapshot—a key to a rabbit run," scoffed the judge. "A great deal must hang from that sort of thing! But, whatever it might have been, you only claim to have had the trifles. No one in this part of the country has seen any of them."

"No," said the boy, "because your thief and murderer took care of that when he killed Philip Anson and stole the black satchel."

"*My* thief and murderer?" fairly shouted the judge. "Wasn't the sign of Scorpio on his forehead, as they say? Isn't that a proof that the Mexican did the work?"

"Very likely," answered Prince Charlie. "And very likely Scorpio would have done the thing just for fun, eh? After hiding for ten years, he would come out of his hiding place and do a murder, and steal a thing in which he had no interest. Not a bit! There was nothing for Scorpio to gain in keeping me from my rightful inheritance.

"But it meant millions to the men who have been living on my father's land for ten years! It meant no payment of the back rent in sums which would have bankrupted every Dinmont, Crowell, Benson, and Livingston in the lot. No, Judge Benson! If Scorpio came here to kill Anson and steal the satchel, then he came because he was hired, and hired at such an enormous price that he was willing to sign the deed he committed!"

THIS was about as clear a statement of the case against the men of Dexter Valley as could have been made, and the judge was plainly hard hit. "Malignant traducing of character!" he burst out. "You will learn, young man, that one has to have proof—and good proofs—before charging such a crime."

"I have the proof," said the boy. "I followed the back trail of the man who killed Anson and left the sign of Scorpio upon him. I went with the sheriff, and we followed down into Dexter Valley."

At this, there was a general gasp.

"Dexter Valley is a big place!" cried the judge. "You followed down into the valley, and there you lost the trail?" he suggested.

"Yes, we lost the trail, after a time."

"And you imply that the trail has a definite meaning?"

"I do," said the boy.

"Let me hear your reason, then," said the judge.

"You wish to have me lay all of my cards on the table, I see," said Prince Charlie. "Well, I'll show you everything that I know, judge. It may be," he added, and that velvet voice of his suddenly warmed a little, "that every man in the valley is not a scoundrel. I'd hate to think that these four fellows are sneaking murderers, or connivers at murder, for instance. I find it hard to think that you would countenance such things, Judge Benson."

He smiled cryptically, then added sharply, "But, I can't say the same thing of every one, and the first person I accuse is Steven Dinmont."

"What!" shouted the judge, who could not keep his voice down. "I know and

respect Steve Dinmont as though he were my own brother."

"No doubt you do," replied the boy, "but the trail of the man who used Scorpio's sign went out from under the eyes of the sheriff and me when we came to the tangle of corral fencing around the place of Steven Dinmont."

"It ain't me that accuses him," said a quiet, drawling voice. And there was Sheriff Tom Winchell, looking a great deal more like a half-wit than ever before. "But that's where the trail went out," he added, "and there's a couple things I found in the ashes of a little dead fire down that same trail."

He pulled from his pocket and showed us in his hand the blackened and half-melted remains of two keys! The thing came in so pat that even the judge was moved. He shifted his glance from side to side, as though to measure the strength of the sentiment which surrounded him, and then he said, "My dear lad, if you have any real claims to present to the men of Dexter Valley, why don't you present them fairly before us?"

"Do you suggest," said Dexter, "that I should go down there among you and talk to representatives?"

"That's what I suggest," said the judge. "Make up your mind what claims you wish to prefer. Then come to Dexter House tomorrow night. You know that I live there now. There we'll talk over the thing amicably. I'll give you my personal guarantee that you'll come and go safely."

Prince Charlie, for a moment, looked quietly at Benson, and then at the four young riders with him.

"I think I might trust you, all five," said he.

AFTER the crowd had disbanded, young Dexter accompanied me into the hotel and asked if he could have a few words with me. I told him that I should be delighted, and we went up to my room.

"Mr. Dean," he began. "I'm about to say a strange thing to you."

"Very well," said I, smiling. "I'm here to listen."

"You've seen me through several odd moments," he said. "From the start you've been the greatest sort of help to me."

"If you mean that matter of the decision," said I, "that was spoken merely because it seemed justice to me."

He shook his head. "I don't refer so much to that," said he. "I never really can thank a man for doing and saying what seems right to him. But I must thank you for another thing." He paused. "You know, Mr. Dean, out here in the wilderness, a man reverts to nature to a strange degree. And I've felt myself reverting."

"Yes," I said. "I think I know what you mean. I could even name an instant when the primitive urge almost mastered you."

He leaned forward at this. "What was that, Mr. Dean?"

"When you left the steps of the veranda and walked toward the riders, today," said I. "It was not merely that which you first had in mind."

"Then what did I have in mind?" he asked.

"You were thinking, in the first place, that you would like to draw a gun, and to leap out at them, firing as you ran."

"What makes you think that I carry a gun?" he demanded.

"The other day you invited that hulking bully to a gun fight. A man can't fight with his teeth, like a tiger."

"Why do you use that word—tiger?" he asked.

"Because from the first moment you seemed to me dangerous," said I. "And because that's the way the other people look on you."

"You've heard them talk about Dexters, before," he suggested.

"No. I never had heard of the Dexters, I'm sure, when I first laid eyes on you. It's not the past reputation of your family that made Jay Burgess run for his life!"

He nodded, after a moment of thoughtful pause. "I was rather tempted to leap out at those Livingstons, and at Judge Benson, in spite of their numbers," he admitted. "But as I was turning the thing in my mind, my eye happened to fall upon your face, among the crowd. The peace of it, the pallor, and the calmness of your eyes, Mr. Dean, did me a great deal of good, because it

reminded me that man is, or ought to be, a civilized animal."

"Thank you," said I. "That's a thorough compliment."

He waved aside the notion of such politeness. "You've helped me so much," he went on, "and you've come so close to the heart of my mystery, that I'm inspired to ask a great favor. I want you to go in my place to the old Dexter house and make them my terms in a formal proposal."

"That I should go in your place!" I exclaimed.

"If I went myself," said he, "I would almost certainly be walking into a trap."

"No, no!" said I. "I think that Judge Benson intends to act like an honorable man, and so do the young Livingston boys."

"They may intend to do so," said he. "But there are others in their families whom they couldn't control. No, I wouldn't trust my life in their hands for ten seconds. Rifles may be fired by unknown hands through windows, and such things, you know."

I could not help nodding. The danger seemed far more than imagination to me. "Dexter," I said frankly, "I'm not a hero. I don't pretend to be one. The mere thought of going down there as your representative—"

"You'd be in no danger. They wouldn't dare. They couldn't blame your death upon some old feud. You've been here too short a time to have entered into any of the blood feuds that exist around here. You'd be as safe as you are sitting in this room." He paused, then added, almost as an afterthought, "Besides, you've handled men before this, and you could read their minds for me, in part."

"What terms do you want me to put to them?" I asked.

"You think over the matter of going," said he. "I'll see you again tomorrow morning, and then, if you want to do this great thing for me, I'll tell you the terms."

V

WHEN I came down to the hotel dining room the next morning, young Dexter already had breakfasted. Claudia Laffitter came to my table and chatted with me. She said that Dexter had gone off to buy a pair of horses from a fellow on the edge of town. Then, watching me intently, she exclaimed suddenly, "I'm frightened! He's the last Dexter; and I fear that he won't be long on earth."

"Why do you say that?"

She waved toward the western window of the dining room. "All those people!" she said. "He'll surely try to go down there among them, and if he does, how long will he last. Oh, he'll be swept away by them!"

"I don't understand it," I said. "If the Dexters had a real claim on the ground, how can it be taken away from them? If they disappeared, I should imagine that the State would get it, or some such thing."

"You're thinking of Eastern ways. Ten years ago law hadn't much more face than a scared rabbit, out here. And when you have people like the Crowells and Bensons and Livingstons, they're strong enough to hold on to what they have a ghost of a claim to. The Dexters have disappeared. For ten years those people have gone on improving the land they used to rent.

"And now comes one poor fellow, without many real proofs, to claim the Dexter inheritance—well, what do you think will happen to him? He's in enough danger, but when he swears, as he did yesterday, that he's going to follow one man's trail, and when we know that trail dips straight down into the valley—well, don't you see that he's tying a stone around his neck and then vowing that he'll jump into the water?"

There was nothing I could do but agree. "Yes," I had to say, "almost from the first moment I laid eyes on him, I felt, somehow, that he was tied to a lost cause."

"That's it!" said she. "A lost cause. He has the look of it. Hullo, Jerry. How's things on the ranch?"

She broke off to call to a big, burly lad who had just come into the room, and presently she left me and went over to him. A moment after this, the dining room was in a turmoil. For out in the street we heard a crackling of re-

volver shots, people shouting, and then a prolonged and screeching cry.

Of course, we got outside on the double-quick. People were flocking toward a little house down the street, and I ran after them. When we got into the place, we found a man writhing on the floor, with young Dexter kneeling beside him, holding him by the shoulders. "Who sent you?" he was demanding. "That's all I want to know. Who hired you? Tell me that and I'll leave you alone—and we'll take care of you!"

The man on the floor was a big fellow. He was still kicking and groaning, for he was badly hit. But when Dexter asked questions, he refused to make an answer, and finally yelled out at him, "To heck with you! I ain't gonna tell. Are the rest of you gonna stand by and see me bleed to death?"

DEXTER got up and stepped back, dusting his hands, and still watching the face of the other, while Keenan, the druggist, stepped in and took charge of the wounded man. I mixed around with the crowd and at last found an eye-witness telling the story to a group of open-mouthed listeners.

What had happened was that when Dexter rode back down the street on his newly purchased horse, leading a second one behind him, out of this house, which belonged to the wounded man, Stew Marsin by name, came a sudden chattering of guns, and Dexter's horse fell with him, shot dead. Dexter landed clear of the body, however, and using the bulk of the horse as a bulwark, he opened a return fire on the house. Almost his first shot struck Marsin, and as the latter began to yell and the shooting from the house ended, Dexter charged straight across the street and inside.

The others were already clattering out of the place by the back way, and they scooted off on horses which they had tethered in the brush before any of them could be identified. The tracks, later on, showed that three confederates had been in there with Marsin.

Marsin was not to die of that bullet, however. He lay in frightful misery, but even the inexpert Keenan was able to say, after a brief examination, that the man would probably live. They put him on a bed in his own house, and two neighbors volunteered to nurse him until he could ride a horse.

I heard one of these volunteers say, "I'll take care of Stew till he can ride out of town. And if he stays here a day after that, I reckon that he won't be needin' any more nursin'. He'll just need a hole in the cemetery."

A dozen riders I learned were already in pursuit of the three fugitives, and I went back to the hotel very thoughtful in spirit, and remembering what the garrulous old sheriff had said—that guns would soon be flashing because of Prince Charlie.

It was nearly noon before I saw young Dexter again. He had gone calmly back to the horse dealer and bought another animal to take the place of that which had been killed. With this he returned, and looked me up at once.

"Have you thought over that matter?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yes, I think that I'll ride down to Dexter Valley for you," said I. "I'll ride down, unless I lose my nerve, this afternoon. Suppose that you tell me what I'm to say to them."

He drove straight into the matter, taking out a sheet of paper and sketching in the lay of the land. He noted down the houses, and gave me the names. I won't reproduce, here, what he told me, because it will appear in due course. We had lunch together and talked some more, and afterward Dexter said, "Now for your share in the deal, Mr. Dean. I suggest that you and I work on a percentage. I think you ought to get—say twenty-five percent of everything that I salvage out of Dexter Valley."

He waited, his eyes keenly upon me. I could not help frowning, because in spite of his shrewdness he had misunderstood me.

"No," said I. "I'm out here in the West for my health, and not for business. I wouldn't take a penny, or a blade of grass, or an acre of ground. I believe that you're in the right. If I can help you to win what is yours, I'm contented."

"Are you willing to shake hands on that?"

"With all my heart," said I, and he stretched out his hand to me. I grasped it. It was a cold hand, and it closed slowly but hard on mine.

"You mean it!" said he in amazement. "You actually mean it! Well, it isn't the first time I've accepted charity, during these last ten years. And I'll accept yours, if you're still minded to go down there for me."

In ten minutes I was mounted on one of his horses, and he strapped on behind the saddle a small pack containing what necessaries I might use if I had to remain in the valley overnight, as seemed likely.

He stood for just a moment at the shoulder of the horse, looking up at me.

"This is a mighty brave thing, sir," said he.

"Stuff," said I, very pleased.

"I was going to give you some advice about the proper way of dealing with them," he went on. "But I won't. You'll see the proper thing to do, when the time comes, and I think that I'd rather trust to your judgment than to my own."

He shook hands with me, and I started.

THE Dexter House was not a very big or imposing place. It was built rather long, to be sure, but only in the central section was there a second story. The walls were made of logs of varying sizes. I have seen a hundred better built log cabins. This was simply a big one and it looked as though the trees nearest at hand had been felled, helter-skelter, and squared on the ground to fit into the first place that could be found for them.

In this way, quite a space had been cleared around the house, but no effort had been made to make a garden. The only things that bloomed before the house were a couple of long hitching racks, with holes pawed out along them. Three or four horses were tethered there at this moment, and I thought that their wild eyes and shaggy manes were telling what sort of people I might expect to find inside.

I tied up my horse, went to the door, and knocked.

"Hey!" called a voice. "Come in, can't you?"

I went in, at that singular invitation, and saw a big young man seated in a large, half-furnished room, pulling at some straps which I gathered formed part of a bridle.

"Hello, stranger," said he. "Lost your way?"

"Not if this is Judge Benson's house," said I.

"This is his house," said the boy. "Set down and rest your feet. Pa's out. You wanta see him?"

I said that I did, and at this point, the judge himself came into the house. He seemed amazed to see me.

"You're from the boy, I suppose?" said he. "Got a proposition for us?"

"Yes."

"I'll get some men together inside of a coupla hours," he replied. "Pete, get up and stir your bones. Ride over to the Crowell place and get Marvin Crowell. And stop in on the way and tell Clay Livingston that I want him. Also send somebody over to Steve Dinmont's. I want Steve right pronto."

The boy disappeared through the front door, and the judge sat down to talk to me. He said not a word about Charlie Dexter, however. His talk was about crops and prices, and road building, and such matters, and what the fall price of beef might be; and by the time the conversation ended, the dusk was commencing, and the judge told me that I must stay there for the night.

So he gave directions for putting up my horse, and then he himself carried my pack up to a bedroom where he left me with the remark that supper would soon be ready, and the other members of the conference would be on hand for it.

It was quite dark when I was called for supper. I went down and found that we five were eating alone. Mrs. Benson and her children had a table in another room—and a riotous lot of noise they made. I took note of the guests, first of all. Marvin Crowell I had seen before, and he appeared even more withered and leathery hard than at our first meeting. Clay Livingston, quite unlike his stalwart and handsome sons, was a lean, sour, melancholy man.

Steven Dinmont was different from all the others. Both broad and deep, he had a round face that was all brown and red, forever smiling.

HARDLY a word was spoken until the eating was finished, but as the judge was stirring the third or the fourth spoonful of sugar into his coffee, he pointed to some enlarged photographs on the wall.

"There's some real Dexters," said he. "Does your friend look at all like them?"

I looked carefully at the pictures—five or six in all. The men were, without exception, big fellows, darkly handsome, and the women seemed a tall and haughty lot.

"They seem to have swarthy skins," said I. "And this Charles Dexter has exactly such a skin. They're dark, and he has dark hair and eyes, too. As to—"

"Hair and eyes—rot!" the judge cut in. "Look at the size and the cut of 'em, compared to that hunting cap up yonder in Monte Verde!"

I could not help saying, "He seems enough of a man to hold up his end of a fight. He did this morning, as a matter of fact, when four hired thugs tried to murder him."

"Hired thugs? Who hired them?" asked the judge promptly.

"Ah," said I, "about that there's a good deal of argument. People, doubtless, who have good reason to wish that Charles Dexter were out of the way." Then, before he could answer, I noticed an odd thing and pointed it out. "Between those two pictures, Judge Benson, it looks as though the wall paper were darker—as though another picture had been hanging there, until recently. Is any of the collection missing?"

The judge, at this, gave me a quick side flash of his eyes, but he answered at once.

"Used to be a picture of an elk that Tom Dexter killed a whale of a time ago," he said. "I got tired of looking at the thing, and the fool smile that Tom wears, standing beside it. But now that supper's over, let's get down to business. What does this lad want to say to us?"

"He says that he wants to put the thing fairly before you, in the beginning. He feels that you murdered his family—"

"There ain't a shade of proof about that!" cut in the judge.

"With his own eyes," I retorted, "Dexter saw Manly Crowell shoot down his father."

"It's a lie!" cried little Crowell, his face turning purple with anger.

"Then why," I challenged him, "didn't you bring Manly here to refute the statement? You must have known that it would be made."

"Manly's had a hard day," said his brother. "Besides, the judge didn't ask him to come."

I did not press the matter, but went back to listing the points in Dexter's position. "There are two people whom he excludes from any treaty of peace which he may make with you," I said. "One is Manly Crowell. The other is Scorpio."

"Hold on, my friend," broke in the judge. "We'll take those things one at a time. Any treaty of peace that he may make with us? Who wants one with him? But supposing we should wish to make an agreement, Manly is one of us, and would have to be protected. As for Scorpio, we have nothing to do with him. Why should you bring up his name?"

I REPLIED, "You want to make peace because you yourself asked him to make his proposition. Manly Crowell is a murderer, and cannot come in with the rest. Scorpio was a tool in your hands—or in the hands of some of you. I think this answers your three points."

"Answer be jiggered!" snarled Livingston. "What do we care for Dexter or his answers?"

"This talk is leading nowhere," cried Crowell. "I always said that it wouldn't lead nowhere!"

"Wait just a minute, boys," suggested Steve Dinmont. "They's still a chance it might be worth while. No matter what we think about the thing, maybe this is Dexter. And if it's Dexter, maybe he's got a right on the ground. And maybe Scorpio was hired by some of the valley people. Certainly this here boy has got a kind of a right to be suspicious when four thugs try

to murder him as he walks down a street in Monte Verde!"

I was amazed to hear my side of the case so clearly presented. But the judge only smiled.

"Steve," he said, "you got a kind heart, but you talk rather simply. As for the four who tried to murder Dexter, what do we know of his past life, or how many enemies he may have? And even if he's a Dexter, which he isn't, we don't know what real right he has to any of the land in the valley. As a matter of fact, the old Dexter grant was such thin tissue and so full of legal holes that it wouldn't hold water in any court." He turned to me. "Sorry you had the ride for nothing," he said. "But we can't be talked to in this way."

At this, I laughed outright. "My dear judge," said I, "I like a good bluff as well as a good joke. But if you're through with the play acting, suppose you pick up the argument where we left off."

"Play acting?" exclaimed the judge. "Do you think we don't mean what we say?"

"I know you don't," said I. "So let's talk turkey."

At this the judge changed his tone. "I never intended any discourtesy to you," he said. "If you really have something important to say, of course we'll sit down and listen to you."

But Livingston was rubbed the wrong way by my cocksureness. "I'm through with it!" he exclaimed, rising angrily.

"Clay!" said the judge, sharply, "Remember that we're entertaining a stranger."

"Oh, stranger be hanged!" muttered Livingston. Nevertheless, he raked out a chair and slumped down into it. The others hesitated, waiting for the judge to give the clew.

"If you can give us an idea," said he, "of what actually is in your mind, besides accusations that have no foundation, of course we'll listen to what you have to say."

"Very well, Judge Benson," I said. "I can tell you, briefly, how we stand. If you people are innocent, then you have nothing to fear, and you will, of course, disregard everything that I have to say. When I use the phrase 'you people,' I mean by that not necessarily you four, but some of the inhabitants of the valley. And even if your own hands are clean, you can hardly be in complete ignorance as to who they may be.

"If you are clean of any guilt in this affair of the murder of the Dexters, and the recent attempt on the life of Charles Dexter, then of course I'll make no headway. But if you refuse to come to terms with me tonight, perhaps Dexter will decide to take matters into his own hands."

THE judge said, "Suppose you tell us how he could take things into his own hands?"

"Suppose you imagine," I echoed him, "that Dexter should happen to ride down into Dexter Valley, and suppose that while he is down here he finds one of the Crowells, or the Livingstons, or the Bensons, or the Dinmonts, and decides to ask the man, or the boy, a few questions. And suppose the one he ques-

[*Turn page*]

tions should find that he hardly could keep from telling everything he knew about—"

"You mean," snapped Livingston, "that this fellow might come down here and try to torture a lie out of some one?"

"A lie?" said I, gently as possible. "Of course, I don't mean a lie. I mean the truth—the sacred truth—such as a man blurts out when he can't hold his tongue any longer. Just suppose that some one in the valley has something to tell. Suppose there were a confession which described how the men of the valley planned to attack the Dexter family—how Scorpio was hired, and how the murders took place, and how, afterward, four men were sent to murder the sole survivor in Monte Verde. Such a confession would be enough to tear you from your places, throw you into prison, and keep you there for the remainder of your lives!"

I brought this out with all the force I could command, and I was greeted, at the close, with a dead silence, out of which the voice of the judge finally made me an answer.

"No one knows," he said, "the mystery of the attack on Dexter House ten years ago. It was Scorpio who committed the murders, we're sure. If other people in the valley took up arms at that time, it was because they had heard shooting." I smiled broadly, and he went on, after a little hesitation, "You've told us a great deal about what your friend says, but you really haven't given us any definite proposals from him."

"You have kept this land, rent free," said I, "for ten years. You have, to be sure, made a good many improvements here and there, but the fact remains that for ten years he has not received a cent from his estate. Now he does not ask for the back rent, which would probably ruin most of the ranchers, if they had to pay it in a lump sum. Nor does he ask any man in the valley to move from the ground he is occupying. But he wants half the value of every farm turned over to him in the form of a secure deed."

Livingston smashed his fist against the top of the table. "Blackmail! I knew that's all it was. Either we turn over half of everything that belongs to us, or else he hounds us like a mad dog, and tries to cut off our boys!"

"Half?" echoed Judge Benson. "Half of everything? We'd rather die, first!"

I stood up at last. "I suppose you'll want to talk the thing over," said I. "You have Dexter's offer. If I'm out of the room, no doubt you can talk more frankly."

And I went up to my room.

VI

AS I WALKED into the blackness of my bedroom, fumbling for a match, I heard a soft voice saying, "Steady, old fellow. Don't be alarmed." Immediately afterward, a match scratched, and the flame was touched to the round burner of the lamp, which showed to me Prince Charlie himself, in the glow of the light, and now dressed as a true son of the range.

"Dexter," I whispered hoarsely, "do you know what you've done? Do you know that they'd murder you without a second's thought? They're downstairs now, and they've had a bomb exploded among them."

He tilted back his head and laughed. "Of course they'd murder me," he said, "but did you think that I'd wait up there in Monte Verde and give them a chance to murder you, Dean?"

"You don't know your frightful danger!" said I.

"Stuff, Mr. Dean," said he. "I know every rafter, every rat-hole in this house, and I'm safe in it. But now to the point. When you looked around that dining room, did you notice that one of the pictures had been removed recently?"

"Yes," said I.

"Did you say anything?"

"Yes. I asked them what had become of it. The judge answered that it was a picture of one of the Dexters with a dead elk. He was tired of it and had taken it down."

"I don't blame him for being tired of it," said Dexter. "He was so tired that he put it up in the attic of the house, and there I've found it."

He pulled out a roll of paper and

spread it out before my eyes. What I saw was the enlarged photograph of a man in his late thirties or early forties.

"Why," I exclaimed, "that's a good deal like you!"

"Of course it is," said the boy, "and that's why it wouldn't do to let it remain hanging on the wall of the dining room, after the judge had a look at me in Monte Verde. A Dexter standing by a dead elk, eh? Well, the dead elk is there, too, if you look hard enough. It's the picture of Delaware Dexter. He was my grandfather, and they called him 'Delaware', because for a long time he was on the plains working with a number of the Delaware Indians, who were the best hunters and guides between the two seas. Look at it, Mr. Dean, and tell me if it's not a dead ringer for me?"

I looked at it again, "It's like you—very like," I repeated. "It's a big link in your chain of evidence—but you'll have to have more links than this one to convince a judge."

"But I have, I have!" said he. "Not only this, but the known attack on me in Monte Verde, and that little mystery of the stolen bag, and the two keys which the sheriff found in the ashes—it doesn't take many such things to make up a case."

I was still shaking my head in doubt when there was a sharp knock at the door.

"Dean?" called the voice of the judge.

I turned cold and gaped at the boy, and he, after a first swift glance toward the window, slithered out of sight most unromantically on his stomach, and disappeared beneath the bed. Then I went to the door.

The judge came in with so much on his mind, apparently, that he did not notice my perturbation.

"Dean," he said, "we've talked the thing over. As far as we can see, this boy hasn't much to stand on. But we all have decided that we don't want to run into a long lawsuit, and besides, we can see how the boy must feel that the attempt on him in Monte Verde was probably made through the instigation of the valley people. So we're willing to do something handsome for him. The fifty percent he asks is, of course, foolish; but we are willing to guarantee him an annuity for life of five thousand a year."

I LOOKED him in the face. "Judge Benson," I said, "either my friend is an unprincipled young rogue who deserves nothing, or he has a right to every acre in Dexter Valley. He's offered to accept fifty percent of all that belongs to him. Do you think that I can advise him to take less?"

The judge bit his lip. "The very top limit to which we'll go is ten thousand a year!"

"Ten thousand as an annuity which may be ended by a bullet at any time?"

He grew angry once more, then controlled himself and said. "This is the end of any possible agreement, then?"

"I hope not, but I'm afraid that it is," I answered.

"Well, sir, good-night!" the judge concluded, and turned as though to leave.

"Good-night," said I.

I was sure that he would not leave the room, and I was right. I swallowed a smile when he turned back toward me. But here the course of the negotiations was cut short by an explosive sneeze from beneath the bed!

What might have happened to our discussion I can't tell. He had come to my room, however, prepared for more than mere argument, as he now showed. For, when the sneeze exploded he shouted an order, and into the room charged three armed men, weapons in hand, led by big young Benson, and behind him, Dandy Bullen, my old acquaintance at the town of Monte Verde.

"The bed! The bed!" the judge shouted. "There's somebody there under the bed!"

At the same time, from the shadow beneath the narrow cot, out slithered young Dexter, and leaped from hands and feet straight toward the window.

The judge already had a revolver in his hand, poised, and he brought it down with an oath that ground out between his teeth.

I reached for the gun, and as it exploded, my hand knocked it up. The bullet crashed through the frame of the window a few inches over the head of Dexter, and then I saw him dive out of

the window into the dark of the night. The judge, at the same time, turned with a howl of rage, and knocked me flat against the wall. The force of the blow dropped me to my knees, but I was not too stunned to hear and to see what followed.

"It's Dexter! It's Dexter!" yelled the judge. "After him, every man jack of you! Call out the boys! Get the horses. Ride like thunder on a vacation. Get that man! We'll make you all rich if you shoot him down. Dead or alive, we want him!"

His furious face, as the younger men stampeded from the room I shall never forget. For his own part, the judge was fully occupied with me, and the way be handled his revolver gave me the impression that he wished he had used the gun on me instead of the mere weight of his hand. I got to my feet, badly frightened, of course.

"March along with me!" said the judge.

He took me by the coat, and thrust me ahead of him out of the room and down the hall. And so he brought me to the same dining room where we had eaten that evening. The judge fairly hurled me into a chair, and I fell into it so hard that it skidded almost a yard under the impact.

THE noise of shouting and stamping echoed through the house and, passing outside, finally faded away in distant hoofbeats. The judge, all this time, did not speak, not because he wished to hold back any words, but because his passion stifled him.

At last he opened his mouth and dragged down a huge breath.

"You sneaking, hypocritical, murdering cur!" he shouted at me. "You got him into the house under your wing, a snake to turn loose in the middle of the night, did you?"

I shook my head. He bit at the air again, like a dog at raw meat.

"When they bring him back," he said through his teeth, "we'll decide what to do with him—and you. The same thing for the two of you. You're the impartial friend, the disinterested representative! Faugh! I almost was taken in by you. Almost! But now I see the truth. You'll be an easy man for the world to forget, and the world is going to have its chance to forget, I'll promise you!"

"No doubt it will," said I.

And at that moment I heard the distant trampling of horses along the road! A savage, poisonous smile of satisfaction appeared upon the face of Judge Benson. He was forecasting a frightful triumph. An Indian might wait thus for the return of the war party and the disposal of the prisoner.

"By the great—" he began. Then he stopped, and suddenly his expression changed. "What if—"

I knew what he meant. My own heart suddenly raged with joyous hope in my breast. What if young Dexter had escaped from their hands?

There was no tremor in me as the riders came pouring slowly up around the house. Half a dozen of them trooped into the room, and the first face I saw was that of Dandy Bullen. The expression on it was to me like the most delicious music. For he was as dark as the night outside, and he gave only a glowering glance to the leader of the clans, Judge Benson himself.

Clay Livingston sat down and rested his face between his hands. All of the others remained standing.

"Well? Well?" said the judge at last. "You've come back like a pretty pack, with your tails between your legs. Dogs? I wouldn't compare you with dogs! You've let one fox get away from you!"

Clay Livingston looked up, steadily, toward the judge. "He has my boy, Slade!" said he.

"What?" shouted the judge.

"Tell him, somebody," said Livingston, and buried his face in his hands once more.

I felt a pang of pity for him, and yet wonder overcame me. Fleetness of foot and cunning might have saved Dexter, but actually to have caught Slade Livingston, big, formidable lad that he was, seemed utterly impossible; not only to save himself, but to take a prisoner in flight!

"Say something!" roared the judge. "What happened? Were you fools all paralyzed? Couldn't you ride? Couldn't you shoot?"

"We ride as well as the next," said

Bullen sullenly. "But him—he can fade out like a ghost. I never seen anything like it. We rode. We seen him, too. We seen him go into the woods down on the Dinmont ranch, and when we seen that, we headed for him."

"Did you all rush blind into the trees?"

"No, we done the right thing," said Bullen. "Livingston, there, was giving orders. He sent part of us down the Dinmont lane, and another chunk riding like blazes across the fields to the west of the woods, and him and Slade and two more went straight into the woods behind Dexter. I was going to the left, between the woods and the water, and I heard the hosses of the two Livingstons and the rest go crash into the wood. Then I didn't hear nothing more worth while, for a time, till suddenly I saw Chip Hooker, riding at my right, turn his hoss around with a terrible yell, pointing back.

"I turned around in the saddle, then, and what I seen was enough. I seen a pair of riders away off in the distance, and one of the hosses was poor Slade's pinto. And right alongside of him, sort of hitched to him, there was another gent, and they were heading out of the tail of the Dinmont woods, and straight over to the ford. They were almost at the edge of the water, when we seen 'em, Hooker and me! I couldn't believe it, hardly. How could anybody?"

"Shut up your comments, and go on with what happened!" cried the judge. "What did you do then? You didn't follow across the ford?"

"We piled right down to the edge of the river," said Bullen, "and then out of the brush on the far bank comes a rifle bullet that tips my hat mighty polite for me!" He took off his hat and showed us the neatly drilled hole through the crown. "Would you've stayed there for Prince Charlie to shoot at you, judge?" he asked pointedly. "He tipped my hat for me, shooting right across the river. He's out to kill, is Prince Charlie, and he's shootin' for the head!"

Clay Livingston stood up.

"Benson," said he, "it's Dean, here, and maybe something to boot, to get back my oldest son. I'm going to trust you to arrange it, or you can trust me to raise more trouble than you ever seen in all of your born days."

And he turned and stalked from the room.

VII

NO LULLABY was ever so soothing to a child's ear as was to me the knowledge that Dexter now had a pawn which he could play for my release. After the departure of Livingston, the judge and several of the others continued to talk about the situation and possible means of meeting it. The chief worry of the judge was that young Livingston, while he was in the power of Dexter, might be induced to talk too much. Sometimes I was brought into the conversation, but I had very little interest in it now. I was soundly tired, and since I could now afford to forget my own dangers, I sank in my chair and was quickly asleep.

When I wakened, after a time, every one had left the room except Bullen and one other, whose name I did not yet know. They were watching me with a sullen persistence, Bullen having a shotgun across his knees, and the other, a rifle against his chair.

Suddenly one of the shutters of the dining room slammed with a huge report against the side of the house. I heard Bullen swear.

"Go latch it again, Billy," said he.

Billy sauntered across the room. "It's blowing up pretty wild," he said, at the window, leaning out a bit into the dark.

"Aw, close the window, and shut up, will you?" ordered Bullen.

I looked across at the youth, expecting to hear an angry retort. Instead, he started back half a step and jerked up his hands shoulder-high. I looked past him into the night and made out, very faintly, the glimmering of a gun pointed at his heart!

That sight raised me out of my chair, for I knew, instantly, that behind that gun was Prince Charlie. I sauntered toward that window, measuring the difficulties. The window was low and wide; Charlie Dexter would have leaped through it like a circus dog through a

ring. But I would have to climb over the sill—and Dandy Bullen had a shotgun.

Billy, perhaps in response to a whispered order from outside, had meanwhile lowered his hands. There was little now to make Bullen suspicious except Billy's long delay in securing the window.

I came up beside Billy. And then I saw, in the dark, the outline of Prince Charlie, and the clear, cold gleam of his steady gun.

"Billy!" snapped Dandy. "Mind Dean. He's right behind you. Say, what the heck is the matter with you, you blockhead?"

That moment I selected for getting through the window. I remember that I was half in and half out when Dexter caught me and jerked me the rest of the way into the kind dark. At the same time, Billy risked his life by leaping sidewise and shouting, "It's Prince Charlie!"

There was a yowl from Bullen, and a charge of buckshot hissed over my head as I landed on the ground. I sprinted right down the side of the house after Dexter, then turned behind him and angled off among the trees. There I saw the horses. The tethering rope I jerked free, and then like any Wild West rider I bounded into the saddle.

But for all my speed, I was behind Dexter, as he headed away from the house.

Behind us, I heard Dexter House wake up with a roar. Guns exploded, too, though none of the bullets came near us. Dexter pulled back.

"Let's get on, Dexter," I called to him. "They'll be pouring after us, in no time, and I'm no expert rider!"

Dexter merely laughed.

"They'll wait a while to curse," said he. "And I don't think that they'll take to the saddle at all. They've had one useless chase, tonight, already. Ah, man," he went on, exultation and joy in his voice beyond my describing, "ah, Dean, now would be the time to go straight back to the house and get in among them! But a little later for that. Break their morale, first, and then drive 'em, some day, like sheep—like—"

MIRTH choked off his words as we rode on. We reached the road. "Here's the road to Monte Verde," said Prince Charlie. "Ride straight down it. That gelding will take you all right. He has the legs and he has the barrel, too!"

I stared up that winding road as if it were the road to heaven. Then, something stopped me.

"Dexter," said I, "if I leave you, it's war to the knife between you and all the men in the valley."

"Aye, it's war to the knife, anyway," he replied. "They asked for it, and now they have it!"

"Well," I told him, "you may amuse yourself for a while, like a cat catching rats, but it's a diet that would soon be the end of you. If you'll let me stay with you, Dexter, I'll try to be your emissary once more, and carry terms of a new peace to them!"

He brought his horse closer to me and looked at me with steady eyes.

"Why, man," said he, "that's the offer of a true friend."

He put out his hand, silently, and gripped mine, then turned his horse off the road. My gelding followed him, without control from my hands, as he led the way along a winding cow trail across the meadows of a pasture land, darkly blooming with groves and thickets here and there.

On the way, I asked him where Slade Livingston was. He said that he would show me presently.

"Tell me, Dean," he went on, "how they felt in the house when they learned that Slade was with me. And what did the judge say? There's the villain, I think. The judge is the man, I'd say. What do you think, Dean?"

"The judge," I said, as judicially as I could, "is no ordinary person. I can't say, as yet, except that I'm glad that you got me out of his hands."

"I never could have done it," he said, "if you hadn't budged his gun."

"How in the world could you see what I did?" I asked. "Your back was turned, and you were diving through the window, as nearly as I can remember."

"I have an eye in the back of my head," said he. "That's my great ad-

vantage, in a pinch."

"And where's Slade Livingston now?" I repeated.

He began to chuckle. "Stretching," said this remarkable youth. "Just having a good stretch to take all the lies out of him and leave him nothing but the truth."

"I don't know what you're driving at," I said.

"You'll see, in a minute," he assured me.

And I did! It is a thing which I still hate to think of. For there in a copse to our left was Slade Livingston tied up by the wrists to the bough of a tree with his feet just touching the ground.

His weight sagged straight down; his numb legs vainly strove to take off some of the pressure from the straining, stretching ligaments of the shoulders, but they were simply bending uselessly at the knees. His mouth was open, and I wondered why no sound came out until, looking closer, I saw that the jaws were distended by a gag.

Dexter dismounted and removed the gag. A deep, wordless groan came from Slade.

"You've had a chance to rest your body and work your brain," said Dexter. "Will you talk freely now?"

"Yes!" came the almost inaudible whisper. "Yes, yes—oh—"

AND Dexter cut him down. He fell, literally, into a heap like a lifeless thing, a creature without volition, a being without any power. Dexter straightened him out, and then sat him up against the trunk of a tree. He pulled out a flask and pressed it to the lips of the youngster. Slade Livingston drank deep and groaned.

"Take a little time," said Dexter cheerfully. "You'll find that the pain grows less, after a time. Will you smoke? No, I don't suppose that you can raise your hand to your face, just now." He actually stood there calmly before his victim, lighted a cigarette, and smoked it through with careful appreciation.

"It's about time for you to talk, Livingston," he said finally.

At this, Livingston said with a groan, "I'll tell you—and God forgive me! I wish that I'd died, sooner!"

"You understand, Dean," said Dexter. "It's to be the whole history of the night ten years ago, as only a Benson or a Livingston could give it. It ought to be worth hearing, eh?"

"What I heard comes from—" began Slade Livingston, in a groaning voice which I can still both feel and hear. I could stand it no longer, and the words rushed up from me.

"Dexter," said I, "I'm sorry that I ever laid eyes on you. Of all the horrible things that I've ever seen, this is a great deal the most horrible!"

"I understand," said he. "You're a decent fellow, Mr. Dean. But you don't realize the whole history that goes behind this. You haven't stood as I stood, to watch your father being murdered. You've not been hounded by the mystery of Scorpio, or wanted to take your revenge in blood, as a man should, but been too much in the dark to know just where you should strike. But here's the door that will open the whole treasure of knowledge to me. D'you wonder that I wanted to open it, even in this way?"

"Dexter," I said, "did Slade Livingston have any part in what was done ten years ago?"

"No, he was only a boy, of course."

"Then you're utterly beneath contempt if you wring from him a story that he's heard in confidence and that will affect the lives of others."

He took out a second cigarette, lighted it, and blew the smoke thoughtfully above his head.

"You're right," he said. "I'm wrong. I'm entirely wrong, and I've done Livingston an injury."

SLADE LIVINGSTON, meanwhile, was too far gone to take in the effect of my intervention. He started to mumble. "On that night, what happened was that—"

"Hold on," said Dexter. "You're not to talk. I've changed my mind. It appears that I've been a good deal of a brute, Slade, and I'm sorry." He turned to me. "What will we do with him?" he asked. "He can't walk—not for a day or two, I dare say. He certainly can't lift his arms for a week. We'll

have to get him to his house, I suppose—and give the hornets another chance to sting us. Aye, and they'll have no hesitation."

"Charlie," Livingston said, "if you can get me to the Orchard place, they'll take care of me and cart me home again."

"Are the Orchards still living here in the valley?" asked Dexter, evidently surprised. "I thought that you would have hounded those folks out, long ago."

"Because they were friends of your father's?" asked Livingston.

"Yes. They stood with us on that night."

"They stood with you, and the others respected them for it," said Slade. "They're poor as mice, but they keep going."

"What made them poor?" demanded Dexter. "They used to have two whole sections of fine land!"

"They lost a lot of it, I don't know just how."

"And now who has the land they lost?"

"Why, the Dinmonts and the Crowells, I think."

"I thought so," said Dexter. "Tell me honestly, Slade. Have they a friend in the valley?"

"Well," said Slade, "I've seen a good deal of Jenny Orchard, and they're friends of the Laffitters. Jenny and Claudia are always going back and forth to see one another. If you can get me to the Orchard house, Charlie—it's not more than half a mile from here, I think."

Dexter nodded. "I'm going to take care of you, Slade." he said. "When you're back on your feet, you'll be after me to get square for tonight's business, and I won't blame you. But now that we're on talking terms for a moment, I want to tell you again that I'm sorry."

Livingston smiled. "Do you think that I blame you much for what you did tonight?" he replied. "Not a bit! I might have done as badly by you. At any rate, I would have shot you down, if I had half a chance, and been glad of it! Charlie, I think that we could call the thing fair and square, so far as I'm concerned!"

SOMEHOW we managed to get him to the Orchard house. A window screeched up and a man's voice called, "Who's there?"

"Slade Livingston," the youth answered. "I've had a fall, and I'm badly done up."

"I'll be right with you," said the other.

When we got our burden off the horse and up to the door, it was already being opened by a man in slippers, tightly huddling a coat over his shoulders. He held up a lantern.

"Why, you look like you'd been shot! Bring him in, boys. Easy, now. This way. Stretch him out here on the sofa. Any bones broke, Slade? Wait till I call Me and Jenny!"

And he sent out a whoop that soon brought the women scurrying through the house. First came little Jenny Orchard, a pretty brown-faced girl, then Mrs. Orchard, and, after these, a tall girl who commanded one's attention with a sudden force, in spite of the dimness of the light. It was Claudia Laffitter. She gave the rest of us not a glance, but suddenly she was taking charge of Slade, and the other two women were obeying her instructions.

Old Orchard drew aside with us.

"I don't know you boys," said he.

"You knew me ten years ago," said Dexter.

"Did you live around here?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In Dexter House."

Orchard snatched the lantern from the table, raised it high. "Jumping Jehoshaphat! Ma! Jenny!" he exclaimed. "Just look here, will you?"

Dexter smiled. "Hello, Mrs. Orchard. Jenny, it's a long time, isn't it?" he said.

Jenny was the first to reply.

"It's true!" she whispered. "It's Prince Charlie, and he's come home again!"

A few moments later she hurried out into the kitchen with her mother, where they bustled about to prepare some food. So began an evening which I shall never forget.

Claudia made a capable nurse. She wound a cold, wet towel across the face and eyes of Livingston, and she put a

soothing salve over the abrasions on his wrists. Presently, we heard a groan of relief from him.

"You must have hit a rope when you got that fall," said Claudia. "These are rope burns on your wrists, I take it."

"I got both my hands twisted in the tie rope, like a fool," he replied.

"And yet your clothes don't look as if—"

I thought that poor Livingston would try to keep the secret, but when she had taken the towel from about his eyes, he looked straight up into her face and said distinctly,

"Charlie did it, Claudia. And he had plenty of cause. And I'm not on his trail, either. I'm not even trying to get back at him. Now you know, and you can talk as much as you like about it."

She laughed, very softly.

"I wouldn't talk about it for a million dollars," she said. "Not even to Jenny or her father. Slade, I always said that you were the only man in the valley!"

Then the meal came in, and we all sat down to table except Slade, who had his food brought to him on the sofa. The Orchards wanted to know everything, and Prince Charlie told them.

"And before the end," said Prince Charlie, "I'm going to get back some of what belongs to my family. And when I get back what is mine, you can be sure that you'll get back what is yours, or else my name is not Dexter!"

Well, he did not need to make promises to any Orchard. I had a very odd feeling, while I was in that house, that they looked on him really as a sort of prince, to whom their affection and loyalty were naturally due.

I SLEPT in a blanket on a couch in a front room of the house. When I wakened, it was past noon. Mrs. Orchard fed me a meal that was half breakfast and half lunch. When I asked for Dexter, she told me that he had gone off for a ride with Jenny and Claudia, and young Slade Livingston.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that he could sit the saddle?"

"He groaned a mite," said she, "but he managed it. What happened to him last night, poor boy?"

I shook my head and smiled back at her.

"What would Dexter say if I told?" I asked.

It was two or three in the afternoon when the four young people returned from their ride and reported that the countryside was thoroughly scouted by lonely riders. Beyond any question, they were working in the interests of the valley men.

This had decided Dexter on a point that vitally affected me. Now that the hornets were so thoroughly aroused, he thought that he ought to escort me back to Monte Verde. We turned over to Orchard the two horses which we had been riding the day before, and he gave us in exchange the best animals he possessed. Then we said good-by to every one on the ranch except Claudia Laffitter. She had to return to Monte Verde, so she went along with us, riding her own pretty bay mare.

I went up the road with Claudia and young Dexter with my head down and a frown not only on my forehead but in

[*Turnpage*]

my brain. For I was thinking that I was taking my last ride with Dexter and that, in all probability, I never should see him again. He had advised me—and I knew that he was right—not only to leave Dexter Valley, but to get out of Monte Verde, also, and never stop traveling until I was in the East among my own people. That was the plan which I intended to follow, but nevertheless as we rode along through the burning brightness of that afternoon, my heart ached.

Well, we left the flat of the valley bottom, and we began to climb the first slopes toward the mountains, but Claudia knew of a bypath which wound across the fields, kept much among the trees, and offered a thousand times better shelter than the main road to Monte Verde. She insisted that we take this way.

"But if you know it, they know it—and they know you know it," said Prince Charlie.

However, he allowed himself to be persuaded, and we pushed on into a little steep-sided ravine. I felt an odd presentiment as we entered the mouth of this passage, and we were hardly inside it when a horse neighed suddenly behind us.

"Quick, Claudia," snapped Dexter. "Get your horse up that bank. They're blocking both ends of the gulch!"

The words hammered against my brain like the brazen clapper of a bell. How could they have set a neater trap!

VIII

CLAUDIA did not argue, but she sent her mare gallantly at the slope. I would gladly have taken the same exit, but as I swung the head of my mustang to follow her, Dexter caught my bridle rein.

"Where we go, we'll draw bullets after us," he said rapidly. "And we don't want shots to fly in her direction, do we? Straight back down the gulch is our only chance. They'll hold the upper end twice as strongly as the lower one! Follow me, Dean!"

Whether I wanted to or not, I could not help but follow now. When my mustang saw Dexter's mount turn, it bolted in pursuit with such a jerk that I was nearly flung from the saddle. But I managed to hang on, and now literally we had a message that told us we were riding for our lives, for a bullet cut the air above my head and made me duck and my heart shrink.

A moment later that first rifle shot was echoed by half a dozen others, right behind us, but presently the twisting floor of the ravine jerked us out of sight and range of the men at the head of the gulch, with the clamoring echoes of their shots still beating about our ears; the down slope doubled the strides of our horses; we had a gauntlet before us, and perhaps we could trust to our speed to get through it safely.

But suddenly the rocks and the brush before us blossomed with gunfire! Dexter fired in return. The muzzle of his poised revolver dipped down, and jerked up again with the force of the explosion. He was half standing in the stirrups, I suppose in order to ease the shock of the impacts as the horse struck the earth. He fired to the left and was answered with a yelp like the cry of a hurt or frightened coyote.

He fired to the right, and suddenly a tall man stood up from behind a rock and did a strange thing—for he began to walk forward with strides which were made clumsy and gigantic by the sharpness of the slope. His arms he held before him like a man walking in the dark, and it was a long second before I realized that he simply had been shot and very badly wounded by Dexter's bullet. He did not know what he was doing; he was walking out to meet his death, one might have said.

I saw him, at last, toppling forward, unbalanced. Then I saw him no more, for the speed of the racing mustang whipped me past.

The gunfire had died on both sides of the mouth of the gulch. That deadly marksmanship of the quarry was too much for the hunters, I have no doubt, and to this day, I never have seen and never have heard of finer shooting. For Dexter's horse was flying at full speed, and yet he was able to pick out with such deadly accuracy every enemy who exposed from behind a bush or a rock so much as a leg or a shoulder.

I say that the speed of the horses snatched us through the mouth of that little canyon; and ten seconds from the moment when we heard the whinny of the horse, we were out again in the open rolling lands. We had slipped from the trap just as it was prepared to close over us securely!

We put the first half mile behind us in no time; then, as I looked back, I saw a thing that made me groan. Half a dozen riders were urging their horses after us, while more and more appeared from the background of the trees and streamed off in the same direction.

I looked at Dexter, but to my amazement, instead of whipping up a great speed, he was reining back his mustang to an easier gait. I did the same thing, of course, though I thought he had gone mad.

He cast several glances behind him, and then nodded.

"I think we'll hold them," said he. "Those horses have had some hard work to do before ever they saw us today."

How could he tell that, at such a distance?

NEXT, he headed into a stretch of rocky hills where the going was three times as bad as before, but Orchard's tough little mustangs seemed to run as well uphill as down, and half an hour after we entered this rough grazing land, we could look back from each crest and see the pursuit dropping farther and farther behind us.

"Tell me, Charlie," said I, as he drew the horses back to a jog trot, "how were you able to tell that those horses had had hard work before today?"

"Why, that was simple," he told me. "The moment they began to run, they were flashing like swords. That meant that they were wet with sweat. No mystery about that, Dean. And you see that they've been run into the ground already?"

I could see that, but I pointed out that I was farther from Monte Verde than before, and that I didn't see how we could return to the road safely.

"We can't," he said. "But we can take a roundabout way and hit into the mountains on the right of Monte Verde. You can see the cleft in the hills from here."

It was clearly marked, the higher heads of the mountains standing back a little from a narrow depression, though I never should have judged the place to be a pass. It was not, Dexter explained to me, but merely a place when the mountains were much more accessible. And toward this we now rode.

We went on for a considerable time before we saw a human being. Then as we rounded the side of a lofty wood, we saw before us a rider who was having a hard time keeping on the back of a horse. The horse was bounding high and, coming down with terrible shocks, threw the rider from side to side. Every instant he seemed about to be flung off.

"That's one of the meanest educated buckers that I ever saw," said Dexter, "and the fellow in the saddle is a remarkable man, I'll bet my money."

I stared at Prince Charlie. "What makes you think that he is remarkable?" I asked.

"Why, look at him," said the young man. "You're seeing fifty cents' worth of rags on a two-thousand-dollar stallion, aren't you? Now, then, what puts a man like that on such a horse?"

"Stolen, perhaps," said I.

"Horse thieves aren't often found in Dexter Valley," said Prince Charlie. "Besides, who would be stealing horses in broad daylight? And such a stallion as that wouldn't be left to run the range, I don't suppose."

We were coming up fast, for the stallion was bucking in a circle, without getting ahead. Its strength seemed unexhausted, its fury rather increasing. But when we were a rope's throw from the horse, it stopped its efforts and stood perfectly still, and I was able to get a steadier look at the rider. Every one has seen ugly men. But this man's face was so excessively hideous and deformed, that one hesitated to call him a man.

ONE could see what had happened. He had been kicked or trampled upon. One could almost indicate just where the hoof of the shod horse had struck him. The toe of the hoof had

beaten down over the nose and crushed upon the mouth. It left the nose a twisted thing of cartilage. The mouth was not a mouth. It was a shapeless, ragged, white-and-purple mark, while I cannot even begin to describe the eyes.

I will only say that one of them was puckered so that it appeared to open unnaturally wide, and the other had been drawn aslant and almost closed. The horror of him exceeded belief, and was not lessened by the fact that his hair was prematurely white; and that there was splendid and vital youth in his body. He carried himself like a statue on horseback.

Dexter greeted him with a wave of his hand.

"That's a grand thing you're riding," he remarked.

"A horse is a horse," the other shrugged.

"And some horses are ten," said Dexter.

The stranger smiled. That is, he tried to smile. "Some horses are ten devils," said he. "This is one, and the son of a devil."

"The son of a devil? You know his breeding pretty well then?"

"Yes. I owned the sire."

"Thoroughbred, I'd say," said Prince Charlie.

"You'd say wrong," replied the stranger. "There's ain't an ounce of thoroughbred in him. He's all mustang, that's what he is. So was his father before him."

"You mean a wild caught one?"

"That's what I mean. No tame rubbish. His tail was the flag that I followed a year and a half. The daddy of that bit of life and fire! I wanted to breed him. I wouldn't mix his blood with common stock. Not me! I wanted the same strain. Where would I get it? I spent six months or so listening to reports, following them up, hunting here and there, riding thousands of miles. Finally I got on the trail of a gray mare. You see, he's her color? Iron in the legs and silver in the body. I worked only a month for her, but I rode five horses to death!"

Suddenly his lips parted, and he laughed. I am not a sentimental man. I have seen a great deal of misery. But when I saw the horrible distortion of that face and heard the sound of merriment flowing out, tears sprang suddenly into my eyes.

"That's more than two years to get the parent stock," observed Dexter.

"And another year and a half to wait for the foal, while the debt collectors chased me all through the country!"

He snarled as he said it. He was a cartoon of a man, and his clothes were in tatters, yet Dexter looked on him with an odd respect. Or, at least, so I thought.

"We have a need of a good, fast horse, my friend," said Dexter. "What do you call this one?"

"*Compadre.*"

"A friendly name for such a mean devil. Is there a price on him?"

"Oh, there's a price on everything in the world," said the stranger. "Bring me a diamond as big as he is, and I'll give him to you!"

I smiled, but Dexter did not. "That's a reasonable price," said he, "if a man has to owe his life to the four feet of a horse. Someday he may get away from you, stranger."

"Someday he may, and then he'll never be caught. He knows too much about men to be caught by them, once he runs wild. You've seen his eyes, eh?"

Dexter nodded. "But he's never put you off?"

"A hundred times—in the corral. But once I learned his tricks, I've been able to trust myself to him. It takes hand and heel to ride him, though, when he begins his devil's play."

"Yes, I can see that," said Dexter. "Are you living here in the valley?" he asked.

"Bah! Why should I live in a little barnyard like this?"

"Simply traveling through?"

His reply was enough to make anyone start. "I am here for the same reason that brings you, my friend," he said.

"Suppose you tell me that reason?" said Prince Charlie, coolly.

"You are Dexter?" said the other.

"So you know me, do you?"

"Who else would they be hunting in Dexter Valley?" said the other. "Your horses are dripping," he pointed out.

"You have a pair of eyes," said Dexter, smiling. "But still you haven't told me why I'm here."

"Scorpio!" said the other.

"And what have you to do with Scorpio?" Dexter asked.

THE face of the horseman contorted again. "What have I to do with the devil, you might as well ask!" said he. "I've tried to get rid of him. I could not. I have tried to keep away from him, but now here you see me, hunting for his trail, sure to kill him if I find him—yet when we meet, he will smile his handsome smile, and I shall be his slave again. It will be 'Tonio, *amigo mio!*' when he sees me, and then I shall trust him once more, and once more he will make a fool of me. Unless I can catch him with a bullet before he has a chance to open his lips!"

If I suspected madness before, I was sure of it now. "Yes," said Dexter. "The main reason that I'm here is Scorpio. How did you come to know?"

"Through Scorpio himself. How else?"

"He knew that I was coming?" Dexter asked. "To Monte Verde, I mean?"

"Yes."

"Strange," said Dexter. "I didn't know that myself, until the day before I got there."

"This is what he said, that one! 'He will come to the edge of the valley and look at his land, like a horse hanging his head over a pasture fence. He will go to Monte Verde, from which one can see the whole of Dexter Valley.' That is what he told me, and he went off to Monte Verde to get there before you."

"Suppose that we ride on a little together?" said Dexter. "Or are you going the opposite way?"

"Oh, all ways are the same to me," said the other. "Why should I leave you? If you want to find Scorpio, you may be sure that Scorpio wants to find you. And if I stay with you, I'll meet him face to face again. Then for a quick hand and a sure shot!"

"Well," said Dexter, "I'd be glad to have you with me—particularly glad if I can meet Scorpio while you're along. What's made you hate him so?"

"Listen to me," said the other, and like a practiced narrator, commenced his story. "You see me, what I am now?" began Tonio. "Well, not so many years ago, I was a man!"

"Believe me, senores, I was a man to be looked at twice. I was tall, straight, handsome. Women dropped their eyes on me when I went by. Men liked me, too. I had many friends. I did not drink. My heart was gentle and soft, in those years, amigos, but now my heart is hard because of Scorpio." He paused. "Oh, the fiend and the man together! When he said that he was my friend, how could I help but believe him? When he talked with me, I felt that the world was flowing over with friendship. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said I, but Dexter said nothing.

"Even the girl I loved liked me better when Scorpio was with me," continued Tonio. "Why not? Scorpio was a famous fellow. He had killed men. And he called me his friend. He slapped me on the shoulder and told the girl how much I meant to him. It was a new world, he said, since he had met me. Tears used to come into my eyes when I heard him praise me. And he would be always finding things with his money and—"

"There was blood on that money," said Dexter dreamily.

Tonio clapped a hand to his face. "There was blood on it!" he exclaimed, with a wail of horror in his voice. "That I know now, but I was a boy and a fool, in those days, and how could I tell? Well, Scorpio would give me a great deal of money. There was no bottom to his purse for me. And he was always suggesting ways of spending it.

"For the girl, too. I bought her fine mantillas, and little diamonds, and rings, and everything that a girl's heart desires, and every day when I brought her something I would say, 'My love, when are we to be married?' And then one day I went, and she was not there. Scorpio had taken her. She slipped from my hand, and Scorpio caught her, and I never could see her pretty face again!"

AS HE said this, he beat his hands against his ugly face, and the tears poured out of his eyes. But presently

he mastered himself and turned to me, as if to resume his story.

"Of course you wanted to kill him," said I.

"Yes, yes!" said Tonio. "But when I met him again, I smiled and pretended that it was nothing."

"And the girl? She was still with him?"

"Still with him? How long can a woman live with a fiend? No, no! She was gone. She was gone so far that even Scorpio did not know where she was. Well, he seemed glad to meet me again. He said that women were as nothing, compared to the friendship that lives between men and men, and afterward I could not help growing fond of him again. Oh, I could tell stories that would last all night, about what Scorpio was and what he had done!"

"Did you ever," said Dexter, "tell the story of what he did in this valley, ten years ago?"

"Ten thousand times!" exclaimed Tonio. "I told how he put the signs on the doors. I told how much money he was given. I told how he met the Dexters and shot them down. Of course I told those things!"

"Very strange," said Dexter. "Now that I think back to Scorpio, I would not dream that he was the kind of a fellow to chatter about his own actions."

"We used to go gambling together," went on Tonio, "and I played away everything I had. I played away my land, my horses, my saddles, my clothes. Once I said to him, 'Manuel, look how I stand here! I am dressed, but it is in murder. I have money in my pocket, but it is murder, also. For I know how you fill your purse!' Then I jerked a knife from my belt. 'I shall kill you, Scorpio!' I screamed, and leaped on him. But his hand is harder than iron. With it, he beat down my arm, and he stabbed me here, in the throat!"

With this, Tonio pulled open his shirt and I saw a great whitish scar—a big lump above the collar bone.

"I should have died, and I should have been glad to die," said Tonio. "But Scorpio would not let me. So I lived once more. I was strong. I walked. I went away with Scorpio, and he showed me how to hunt the wild horses. Well, in the first corral that we built, I was caught and beaten by a wild beast of a mustang. He smashed in my face. And Scorpio dragged me out of the dust and sat down beside me, and laughed. There was always mirth bubbling in his throat like water in a well."

"Good heavens!" I broke out. "The man really is an incarnate fiend."

"Tush!" said Tonio. "What do you know? Nothing. I thought that the blow of the horse would either kill or cure me of my fondness for Scorpio, but I was wrong. Then he showed me the great stallion. I saw the horse, and for a year and a half I followed it, as I have told you."

"Was Scorpio with you at the time?" I asked.

"Scorpio? Why should he waste his time dragging over the hills, when there were murders to be done and money to be made? No, no! Scorpio was back in a soft bed, but when I came back with the prize, then you may be sure that Scorpio met me again. He told me the horse was beautiful, and that only I could do the thing. Then I went off and caught the mare, because he told me that it would be a good thing, and because he had praised me.

"So I caught the mare, too, and brought her back, and I spent the patient months until at last this foal was born. And Scorpio used to ride the stallion, while I remained in the dust, watching the foal, until one day I had a great quarrel with him. I told him to go away forever. I told him that I wanted to be a free man, to have clean hands. He laughed at me, but he said that he would go. And he took the stallion."

"Hold on," said I. "Did he steal the stallion?"

"They came running to tell me. I hurried down to the plaza. I could not believe it. But there was my beautiful silver stallion lying dead. I sat down and took his head in my lap. Even his dead eyes were brighter than the eyes of any other creature, man, or beast."

"And then you swore that you would kill Scorpio?" said I.

"Yes," said he. "Then I set out on the son of the old stallion. I set out on this horse, though he was not yet ready

for riding. He still has the wild fire in him. You see it in his eyes. Such were the eyes of his father, but the father began to know me and love me, in the end."

Tonio looked up, with the face of one who remembers heaven, and my heart bled for the poor, simple, half-mad fellow. Then a moment later came trouble, a bolt from the blue for poor Tonio, the very thing that he had dreaded and prophesied.

It was only a sudden pool of dust that started whirling up the road in the wind, but as it came under the nose of the stallion, the horse bounded to the side farther than most horses could bound forward. Tonio, the eyes of whose mind had been fixed so firmly upon the heaven of a pleasant recollection, was suddenly sitting in the dust, in a way that would have made people laugh.

But not even a fool could laugh, to see the gray horse bounding away, riderless, irreclaimable forever, as Tonio himself had declared!

IX

THE very instant that the stallion leaped away, I heard the quick, subdued voice of Dexter, "Watch Tonio!" And the next moment, he flashed by me with his spurs fastened in the flank of the galloping mustang, and his right hand unshipping his coiled lariat.

I saw Tonio's priceless horse bound over a low hedge of brier. The mustang skimmed it in pursuit, and the long, snaky shadow of the rope darted out from the hand of Dexter. It slid forward right over the head of the stallion, but the latter bounded to the side, the noose fluttered and failed of its mark, and away went Tonio's horse, leaving the mustang hopelessly behind.

Tonio meanwhile had risen from the dust and held in his hand a drawn revolver.

"Look out, Tonio!" I shouted at him. "Don't shoot. The bullet might fly wide and strike Dexter."

But at that moment there was a sudden change. The stallion, bolting gloriously for freedom, had run straight on toward a dense grove of poplars, but as it came near them, it veered away from the trees. It might have been that the trunks were packed together too closely to please the horse; at any rate, there the stallion was, turned and rushing at right angles to its former course, while Dexter, who had not flagged in the chase in spite of the way he was being distanced, now swung to the right and cut across the bias to get at the great horse. The mustang, running across a short arc, now came momentarily closer, and again the regathered rope shot out from the hand of Dexter.

The mustang, planting its feet, sat down against the pull, and over the head and neck of the great horse dropped the noose. I held my breath. The shock came. The rope leaped taut, disappeared from sight in a humming vibration, and then snapped with a loud report.

Yet there was enough of that shock to send the stallion spinning, head over heels, and to knock the mustang over, as well. Mustang, stallion, and Dexter were all in a trice tumbling on the field, but Dexter was up again in a second—and running straight toward the stallion. The latter heaved itself up; the mustang, also, was struggling to his feet. As for the stallion, it had plenty of time to get away, but the fall appeared to have stunned it a little. It shook its head, like a hard-hit boxer, as Dexter, the full speed of his sprint still with him, sprang into the saddle.

He had neither stirrup.

The stallion leaped into the blue of the sky, with Dexter clinging like a long-clawed tiger, his body flung into the air. Down came the great horse, and as it landed, by fortune or by consummate skill, Dexter himself landed in the saddle.

"A miracle!" cried Tonio, close beside me.

The bucking stallion, as it fought and raged, came back closer to us. Again the gun was poised in the hand of Tonio.

"Listen to me, Tonio!" I shouted. "Don't shoot. You may hit Dexter instead of the horse—besides, he'll ride the stallion. You see if he doesn't!"

"The horse will kill him!" screeched Tonio. "Look! Look!"

For the stallion, beginning to whirl in amazingly swift circles, made the body

of Dexter swing far to the side. Nevertheless, gaining a fresh handhold, Dexter drew himself upright again. At last, the stallion reared and toppled backward to crush the persistent rider. It was a horrible sight.

The big beast flung backward like a falling mountain, and I looked to see Dexter crushed to pieces. Once more, however, he slipped to the side and landed clear, and as the horse pitched rapidly to its feet once more, again Prince Charlie was in the saddle. It was not, really, like a man fighting a horse, but a tiger battling with some formidable monster. That was how Dexter clung. That was how the stallion raged.

Tonio, watching, seemed more than half hysterical. There was his treasure, on the verge of regaining freedom, and only prevented from running free by a man whose skill in the saddle, no matter how great, was, I judged, less than that of Tonio himself. The latter could not imagine, it seemed, that another man possibly could sit the saddle on the monster. Therefore, much as he loved the stallion, he had his revolver still poised.

Twice and again I thought that he was about to fire—and twice my yell gave him pause.

Again, several times, when the fighters and their dust cloud swept closer to us, Tonio would run out as though he hoped that he could help with his bare hands in the struggle. Finally, he burst out into a hymn of praise and advice which ran something as follows,

"Brace yourself, amigo. He will reverse! There! Fool of a gringo, he has you off—no! The kind saints hold you up with their strong hands—pull harder. Get in his chin against his breast. Courage! Oh, brave lad! Dog of a *Compadre*—man-eater! Hi, he has it! No, no! Straighten him out. Now he will whirl. Oh, what a prince of men! Look, look! It is the end!"

At the last words, Tonio dropped his revolver and began to dance like a madman. Dexter, in fact, finally had the stallion under control, though as the dripping and shining horse came up to us, I thought that I saw a fresh and invincible malice in its expression. For my own part, I would as soon have sat on the back of a Bengal tiger.

WITHOUT a word, Dexter dismounted, gave the reins to the Mexican, and soberly went off to catch his own mustang, which was easily done. After that, he rejoined us, brushing off the dust and the grass which he had picked up in his fall in the first place. But when Tonio, in a new ecstasy as he sat in his saddle once more, turned to him with extravagant praises and called him the one caballero in the world, Dexter merely shrugged his shoulders and looked at the Mexican as if at a strange monster. I thought this had to do with the hideousness of the poor fellow's face, and fresh anger against the young man rose in me.

It was now well on into the afternoon. The sun was behind a western peak, but it would be a long hour or more before it sank beneath the true horizon. Dexter paused to tighten his cinches, and while the Mexican drifted a little ahead, I obeyed a small signal from Dexter's hand and lingered beside him.

He talked as he worked at the straps.

"Dean, I intend to stay down here in the valley this evening. Out of the Mexican I think that I can get the full story of what Scorpio did that night ten years ago. But I'll need a witness, and you're the man. The trouble is that he won't talk in front of you."

"He has so far," said I.

"Don't argue. Believe me when I tell you that he won't talk about it in front of you. But not far from here there's a shack. When we get to it, I'll suggest to Tonio that we spend the night there. He'll agree. I'll advise you to start off for Monte Verde. You'll go. Then, from a little distance, make a detour, slip up to the shack, and try to get in hearing distance. You have a pencil and plenty of paper. Write down what you hear, if there's still enough evening light left for it."

I gaped at Dexter, but as he remounted, I nodded, and started down the road with him toward the place where Tonio was impatiently waiting for us. When we reached the shack Dexter immediately suggested to the Mexican that they should halt there for

the night. Tonio agreed willingly, and we had no sooner dismounted than Dexter told me that I ought to forge ahead and get through the pass into the mountains before the utter darkness set in. Then I could work my way toward Monte Verde.

So I said good-by to him and Tonio, and went off toward the mountains. After following a winding trail for nearly half an hour, I turned about and came back to the house. I tethered my mustang and then started stalking the place. There were some outcropping rocks behind which I crawled, and several patches of shrubbery that sufficiently veiled me, and so it was that I came right up to the wall of the house, at last.

The two were not in it. They had made a fence of big stones to hide their firelight, and having kindled a blaze within this screen, they were cooking supper. I crept around the farther side of the house and, at the corner, flattened myself out on the ground. Still obeying the dictates of Dexter, I took out a pencil and the note pad which old habit always kept in my pocket.

"Do you know what you could do?" Dexter asked the Mexican.

"Tell me, my friend," said Tonio.

"Why, you could send the law after him and hang him, if you had enough testimony to use against him."

"No, no! The law will never find Scorpio. He is much too cunning for them. There is no man in the world but myself who can put hands on Scorpio!"

"I'll have to believe you," said Dexter. "But I don't see why another man might not have a pretty good chance, at that!"

"You would not understand," said the Mexican.

"At any rate," said Dexter, "he was a fool to tell you all of his secrets."

"He could not help it," said Tonio.

"Why not?"

"Because I told him all of mine."

"So he had to exchange his ideas with yours?"

"Yes, of course. You cannot get at the heart of a man unless you give him some of your own in exchange."

"Well, that may be, but when it came to talking about the Dexter murders—you can't persuade me that he told you the truth about them. Men don't talk about murders freely—not ones for which their own necks could be stretched."

"As if Scorpio ever were afraid of hanging!" exclaimed Tonio. "But then, it's plain that you never knew him!"

"But I did," said Dexter. "My own belief is that somebody else put the signs on the doors and on the foreheads of the dead men. Scorpio—why, he was as gentle as a girl. My father thought him the best young fellow on the ranch."

"That was why he would not kill your father," said Tonio.

AND, at this, I began to write with a furious haste. "Of course they wanted him to do that, if they wanted him to do anything," said Dexter.

"Yes, they wanted that. They knew that your father was the greatest of the fighting men on the ranch."

"Well, that's true," said Dexter. "And I begin to think that Scorpio did tell you something of the truth."

"Something? Oh, but he told me the whole truth."

"Yet I'll wager he didn't tell you why he preferred to murder Marshall and Vincent Dexter rather than my father, Jefferson, when it was my father that had flogged him."

At this, Tonio began to laugh. "You think that the flogging had anything to do with it?" he asked. "A murder to pay back for a flogging?"

"Well, but I don't know what else had been done against him."

"Nothing had been done against him," said Tonio. "That devil, that Scorpio, he simply wanted to do something grand and great."

"You mean," demanded Dexter, his voice lowering, "you mean that the fellow was merely pleasing himself offhand?"

"Pleasure and business mixed together. That was what he said to me. 'There is nothing so beautiful, Tonio,' he said to me, 'as a stroke that gives you a dead man and a pocketful of money.' That was why he did the killings. He would not touch your father. He told me that they offered him double the amount

of money, if he would begin with the murder of Jefferson Dexter."

"Who would give him the money?"

"Why, Don Manly, and the great man —Senor Benson. He and Don Manly came to Scorpio and told him they they knew that he had reason to kill the Dexters. They offered him twenty thousand dollars.

"Well, he must have trusted a great deal if he trusted that they would pay him the money."

"He was not a fool. Immediately he asked for payment down. They offered him a thousand dollars. He asked for five. They made the payment at once."

"Good business," said Dexter savagely. "And then what happened—or rather, what did Scorpio say happened?"

"First of all," said Tonio, "the time was agreed upon when Manly Crowell should dispose of your father. And the instant that the gun was fired that killed him, then the rest of the work would be undertaken by the terrible Scorpio. The time came, and Scorpio stood in the hall until the gunshot sounded and Marshall Dexter ran out into it. He shot him down. Then found and killed Vincent Dexter. Every man was up, by this time. The place was filled with armed men, but Scorpio went through them safely, for they could not realize that he was the killer. There was only one thing to be done to make the thing complete. That was the murder of young Charles Dexter, but Philip Anson, the cowpuncher, had taken him along, and Scorpio missed finding them."

"There were other things that Scorpio did that night. There was the way he killed Laffitter, for instance; that pleased him a great deal. But what you want to know is why and how he killed two of your family, and now I've told you."

I had been writing these words down at a furious rate. Now there was a short pause, after which Dexter said, "Well, Tonio, I must say that Scorpio was a fool to tell the thing to you."

"Because I have told you in turn?"

"Yes."

Tonio merely laughed. "You never will kill Scorpio!" said he. "He'll kill you instead, when he's ready."

"What makes you think so, Tonio?"

"Because he has sold his soul to the devil, and that means that he'll never lose in a fight. Oh, you never could hurt him, senor. He has a charmed life."

"And you, Tonio?" asked Dexter. "What are your chances against him?"

"I can kill him," said Tonio, his tone altering to one of despair. "I am the only man in the world of whom he is afraid. And he is afraid of me, because he knows that I am the man who can kill him."

"In spite of the devil?"

"Do you see?" cried Tonio. "It is because I am willing to die if I can take him away with me. Because I am willing to throw away my life to take his, the devil who helps him could not save him from me. I am not afraid."

"I know that you're not afraid of him," said Dexter. "But still, he is said to be a very fast man with a gun, and a beautiful shot. Besides, he'll shoot from behind!"

"He'll never shoot at me from behind," said Tonio, with perfect conviction. "He may murder other people like an Indian, but he'll never murder me in that way. He will have to stand up to me, face to face and hand to hand. He is very good with weapons. Well, that will be all the worse for him when he fights with me. The more skillful he is, the more surely I shall kill him!"

It was as I finished writing these words, and looked up, easing my eyes, that I saw a form detach itself from the brush near the fire and walk toward the two seated men. Then from the approaching figure sounded a familiarly drawling voice.

"Why hello, boys! You ain't drunk up all of that coffee, have you?"

It was Sheriff Winchell.

X

TOM WINCHELL sat down on his heels like an Indian, and sipped his coffee. "Who's your friend, Charlie?" he asked.

"Tonio," said Dexter, speaking very short.

"Hello, Tonio. Seems like I must've seen you before, somewhere."

"No," said Tonio. "Those who have once seen me, never forget the day or the place. And now, senor, I'm going to bed. I've ridden a long distance today."

"How far you rode, Tonio?" asked the sheriff, in his drawling voice.

"Eight hours in the saddle," said Tonio.

"That's a long ride—eight steady hours. It'd take a good hoss to stand it."

"I have a good horse," said Tonio. "Good night, my friends!"

"Just a minute," said the sheriff. "I'd like to talk to you, if you don't mind, Tonio."

"I never waste time gossiping," said Tonio.

"But I was going to tell you," went on Winchell, "that I'd been nine hours in the saddle myself, this little old day. That was what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I am sleepy, senor," replied the Mexican.

"Well, Tonio, I could wake you up," said the sheriff.

"How, senor?"

"I could tell you the trail which I have been following."

"You have a friend here who will listen," said Tonio. "How could it interest me?"

"Because it's Scorpio that I've been after," said the sheriff. "I reckon that you've heard his name, a good while before this?"

Tonio was silent for a moment. "Yes," he said. "I have heard his name—curse him!"

"Oh, he's accursed, right enough," said the sheriff. "But he ain't hanged, yet, and a sheriff like me has gotta take a good deal of interest in him."

"You will never hang him," said Tonio, slowly.

"That's what other folks have told me," said the sheriff. "But you know that a trail is a trail, for an old hunter like me. You're a hunter yourself, Tonio, I take it?"

"I have been a hunter."

"Deer, and such?"

"Yes," said Tonio.

"Ay, and hosses, I reckon."

Tonio started a little. "And what of it?"

"Why, you was a hunter of deer, of horses, and such," said the sheriff, "And so've I been. And so I wondered might you likely have been a trailer of men, too—like me?"

"And why should I have been a hunter after men?"

"Well, I was asking," said the sheriff.

Here Dexter put in, "I'll tell you what, Winchell. That is one of the best men you and I could have met, because he's after Scorpio, just as we are!"

"Then," said the sheriff, "I'll put a bet on him that he'll find Scorpio before us."

"Do you think that I shall, senor?" asked Tonio. "Even before you know what I can do on the trail?"

"Oh, but I know what you can do on the trail," said the sheriff, putting the cup down on the ground beside him. "You see, I've been following and learning a good deal about you. I've been following you for ten years—Scorpio!"

And then I saw that instead of a coffee cup, the sheriff was holding a long Colt trained carefully and steadily upon the Mexican!

"Scorpio!" exclaimed young Dexter. "Oh, by the eternal, and I guessed at it, I guessed at it! I saw it like land on the horizon, Winchell, and couldn't tell whether it was real or a dream."

BUT Tonio seemed not to hear him. "Why do you draw a gun on me?" he demanded of the sheriff. "Why do you call me Scorpio? I ask you why, senor? This friend of mine will tell you that I am not Scorpio. My name is Tonio. I hate Scorpio."

"Of course you do," said Dexter, answering in the place of the sheriff. "Of course you hate him. Oh, I understand your little allegory now." He turned to the sheriff. "He's been telling us some stories about a friend called Scorpio—a man who sold himself to the devil. Quite true, Scorpio. You hate him, because you know yourself. D'you see, Winchell? He's divided himself into two parts. One is honest Tonio, who loves horses and tames them. The other self is the great Scorpio himself. It's a rare thing!"

"Rare?" exclaimed the sheriff. "Yes, it's rare, well enough. He would have showed you Scorpio some time this night, Charlie. He would have cut your throat for you!"

"Of course he would." Dexter nodded. "I only wonder why he didn't shoot me out of the saddle, when I was riding and catching his horse for him, today. Will you tell me why, Scorpio? Was it because you were afraid you'd nick the horse, while you were shooting me? Or that he'd run free, after you'd blown me out of the saddle?"

"It was neither," said Scorpio, who seemed to admit his identity, now. "It was because I loved the horse, and admired the man who could ride him. The time that you hung from the horn with both hands"—here he stretched his hands out before him—"and Compadre jumped into the middle of the sky—"

With that, the Mexican leaped forward in one single gigantic bound. Straight forward he leaped at the crouching sheriff, and over him!

The sheriff fired. Young Dexter, too, flicked out a weapon and started shooting, but by that time, the Mexican was running like a snipe, and coming straight toward me! In a cold frenzy of terror, I leaped up, or rather tried to leap, for I was stiff and cramped from long remaining in one position, and I only succeeded in lurching half to my feet when the swift body of Scorpio struck me.

Down I went, with a yell that might have roused the dead, and he tumbling over me. Then I saw Dexter spin around the corner of the shack and dive at the body of the Mexican like a swimmer into water. They rolled over and over.

I, stumbling to my feet, shaking like a leaf, half sick with fear, saw the pale gleam of a gun lying on the ground and reached for it. I raised it up, and gripped it hard by the barrel, intending to bring the heavy butt down on the head of Scorpio when the chance offered. But if you ever have seen two wild cats spring at one another and writhe and tumble over and over, that was how the pair of men I was watching were now fighting. Besides, it was utterly dark, now, and I hardly knew which was which.

Winchell, in response to my frantic yells, was already rounding the corner of the shack, when I heard the voice of Dexter say,

"That has you, Scorpio, I think. Try to move, now, and I break every bone in this shoulder."

He was perfectly calm. So was Scorpio, as he answered, "I will not move. You have me, all right, Charlie."

"Get a light," said Dexter. "I don't want to budge until we've made pretty sure of him, this time."

THE sheriff lighted a match, and then he supplied Dexter with a piggin' string. With these, Dexter firmly secured the hands of the Mexican behind his back. Then he was allowed to get up, brought back to the fire, and by the light of it he was searched. Among the things found on him were, a picture of an astonishingly pretty Mexican girl, and a thick wad of bills, which the sheriff counted on the spot. It contained thirty-seven hundred and eighty-five dollars.

"Tell me, Scorpio," said Dexter, who showed in his voice and manner not the slightest animus against the man he had hunted down. "Tell why you described so fully what you did on that night?"

"Because," said the Mexican, "I saw that you were suspecting me when we were riding on the road. I wanted to give you something which would take your mind away from me and fasten it on the Scorpio of ten years ago. And I succeeded!"

"And this money," went on the youth, "was given you as part payment for hunting me down?"

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should I talk any more?" said he.

"You have something written, Dean, I hope?" said Dexter.

I pulled out my notebook, and turning back the pages to the beginning, I read off by the firelight everything that I had written down. When I closed the book, young Dexter said, "There you are, Scorpio. I don't think that you can get away from that confession."

"Can't I?" answered Scorpio. "The stuff isn't worth a hang, without my signature."

"You might ask him to sign it, Dexter?" said the sheriff.

Dexter, his face suddenly convulsed, answered, "If you'll leave me alone with him for ten minutes, I may be able to get that signature, sheriff, in spite of your smiling."

The sheriff shook his head.

"Tut, tut, son," said he. "This man is my prisoner. Leave him alone with you? I'd rather leave him alone with a hungry tiger! No, no. I'll look out for Scorpio."

So the triumph of Dexter seemed blocked, in spite of the fact that the man was in his hands. It was the presence of the sheriff that blurred the victory.

"It's a time for a compromise, Charles," I said.

He jerked about at me.

"Don't I know it?" he exclaimed. "Don't you see that that is what's eating my heart out?"

I took Charlie Dexter to one side.

"Charles," said I, "I think that I'll make another trip back to the house of Judge Benson."

Dexter chuckled. "That sounds like a sensible thing," said he. "Do you want to leave behind you any messages for your friends?"

"You mean that he'd murder me, in cold blood?"

"Have you any doubt about that, man?" asked Dexter. "Don't you see what he is?"

"Well," I said, "I only need one thing to make him helpless."

"What is that?" asked Dexter.

"The signature of Manuel Scorpio at the bottom of this confession."

"Is that all you want?" said Dexter.

"I said the signature of Manuel Scorpio," I repeated. "I didn't say his real handwriting."

He understood me then. "You mean, a sham to impose on the judge?"

"That's it."

Dexter leaped at the idea. "If we could only get a sample of his writing!" he exclaimed.

"When you used to talk to Scorpio in the old days," said I, "did he ever tell you how long he was in school?"

"I don't remember that he ever said a word about school," answered Dexter. "Maybe he never went there at all—hold on, Dean. He may not even know how to write his name. A lot of them don't."

SUDDENLY he asked to see the notebook. We freshened the fire a little, and by the light of that, using a fountain pen and writing on the last page of the notebook, Dexter carefully spelled out a name.

He showed it to me and I saw, with amazement, that he had not attempted to produce a flowing signature, but that he had written laboriously, letter by letter, with a rather wavering and uncertain line, the name of Manuel Scorpio. It was like a schoolboy's work, so square and foolish were the letters.

"Do you think they'll swallow this second-grade writing?" I asked him.

"Not if they've ever seen Scorpio's hand," said he. "But if they haven't, they'll say that it must really be his writing. And, if he has signed anything for us, it means that his spirit is broken, and that he'll sign other things—that he's our witness now. That's what you had in mind in the first place, isn't it?"

"Yes," said I. "That will be worse than a gun held at the head of the honest judge, I take it. And we can easily bluff him into making the right terms."

Dexter groaned. "For ten years," he said, "I've sworn to wipe out the murders which Scorpio performed, and to get even with the men who hired him. Now you talk to me about compromise?"

"Well," I said, "is there any real revenge in getting yourself hanged for murder? And that's what surely will happen if you kill Benson and Manly Crowell. Scorpio? No, they couldn't very well touch you for that, but how to get at Scorpio, now that the sheriff has him? After all, I think that Benson would almost rather be killed than give up half his property.

"Here you stand without any real proof of your identity except information which they'll claim you could have picked up from other people, and in addition, a faded old family portrait. They may say that Anson picked you up on account of the likeness and then taught you everything that you know about Dexter Valley. I don't think that you have a good case to bring before the law."

He remained for a time brooding. "Would you really walk into that lion's den again, on my account?" he finally asked.

I told him that I would. Now I only had to settle with Dexter what terms he would ask.

"Mind you," said Dexter, "I say nothing about burying the hatchet. As for what happens between me and the judge and Manly Crowell, that's a thing for me to decide with my conscience for judge. But if I can wring my rights from the valley farmers, I'd be a fool to let the chance slip. I agree not to bring Scorpio into court against them. I agree to turn Scorpio loose—or rather, to let the sheriff take him to jail. I can imagine how long any jail in Dexter Valley will hold him, once the judge starts moving his levers!

"Very well. There's the case. I get half of the land of Dexter Valley, acre for acre. The alternate quarter sections go to me. But outside of Dexter House, I don't claim the buildings or the stock or the implements. I get only the land, the acreage. They've had this valley so long that they'll howl like sick cats when they hear the terms. They know how bad my case is to bring up in the courts, too. But they'd rather pay up than hang, I suppose."

Surely nothing could be clearer than that.

I saddled my tired little mustang, and set out for Dexter House. Arriving, I went up the driveway with a good deal less courage than I had had at the start, and at the door of the house I hesitated for a long moment before I used the knocker.

The door was pulled open a moment later by the great lout of a Benson boy. He gaped at me, and then reached out and got me by the collar and pulled me into the room.

"Hey, look what I found out in the dark!" said he.

XI

THAT big room had in it a number of men, all armed to the teeth. Clay Livingston was there, and Steven Dinmont, as well as the judge, Dandy Bullen, and several others, including one man I had not seen before.

My coming made a good deal of an impression upon them, I saw. Indeed, the judge seemed about to leap to his feet. I think he loathed me even more than he did Dexter, though why his hate should have been so great I don't know. The judge, with face livid, finally settled back in his chair.

"Fetch him here," he said to his son. "But don't choke him—yet!"

The boy actually had stopped my breathing by the violence of his grip. Now he relaxed it, and sent me sprawling before him on the floor.

I picked myself up, rearranged my coat, and waited for them to speak.

"Well," snapped Benson. "What does the fake Dexter want out of us now?"

"He's sent me to give you his lowest terms."

The judge snorted. "His lowest terms! And what makes you think that we'll hear any terms from him? Oh, well, tell us what he wants. But tell it quick!"

"He'll take half the land, alternate sections through the entire valley."

The judge's laugh sounded like the baying of a wolf. "You hear that, boys, do you! He'll take half the land!"

"He'll take half the land," said I. "That's final."

"And you really rode in here to tell us that?" said the judge.

"Yes," said I, "I really rode in here to tell you that, and a few other things that may interest you."

"Go on!" said the judge. "Go on, Dean!"

"I don't come from Dexter alone, in the first place," said I.

"Who else, then?"

"Scorpio."

Clay Livingston shouted out, "You dunderhead, Scorpio has been dead for ten years! It was only some fool of a joker that used his sign up in Monte Verde!"

"You may be simple enough to believe that Scorpio is dead," I told him. "But first look at the judge and see what he believes."

In fact, that sudden bringing out of the name of Scorpio had struck the judge under the fifth rib. The purple of his face had turned to white, and his

eyes were those of a man who sees a ghost.

"What in blazes is the meaning of it, judge?" demanded Clay Livingston.

"Yes, what?" echoed Steven Dinmont, The judge moistened his pale lips.

"It's all a lie," said he, but he could not put any ring of sincerity into his voice, and I think he knew it. He glanced quickly from side to side, to read the expressions of the others. They were staring back at him partly in horror and partly in bewilderment. At last one man spoke.

"Scorpio! Bah! He's been dead ten years!"

He was a wide-shouldered man with a head that jutted well forward, so that it gave him a very aggressive look. He got up as he shouted the words and came menacingly in my direction. Something suddenly spoke in me.

"I suppose that you're Manly Crowell?"

This struck him like a blow in the face. "Why—" he began, then stopped.

"You and the judge," said I, "have good reasons for not wanting it to be known. But both of you know that Scorpio's not dead. The kick of a horse wasn't enough to kill him, though it changed him enough to make him serve your turn, or to start to serve it."

This was a settler for Manly Crowell. He muttered something about "blasted nonsense" but he came no nearer to me. As for the judge, he was rallying himself only slowly.

I PULLED out my notebook and began to read. When I got to the end, the judge, who had been gathering breath as the words flowed along, broke out, "It's a plot. It's a fake from beginning to end. Even if Scorpio hadn't been killed ten years ago, he's the sort of a man who never would have told such things as this. Without Scorpio's signature under it, everything that you've heard read out of that scoundrel's paper is not worth a hang. Dean, you contemptible rat, let me see it!"

"The signature?" said I. "Oh, certainly." And I held up the notebook at the last page. "Merciful Heaven!" breathed the judge, and slumped back so hard that the chair creaked under him.

I added a final touch.

"He's in our hands, judge. He's ours, body and soul, and he's turning State's evidence. So I've dropped in to see if we couldn't arrange a little compromise. Or do you really wish to hang, Judge Benson?"

Steven Dinmont sprang to his feet. "What we've always known about the night when the Dexters were killed is bad enough," he said. "But to think that Scorpio was hired! I've known that you were a hard man, Benson. I didn't know that you were a professional murderer!" He turned on his heel. "Hal and Red, come along with me."

At once two fine boys got up and tiptoed after their father out of the room. I had split the enemy into two camps, at last!

The judge felt this defection, of course. The blow of it gradually brought back his wits, and he got to his feet.

"Suppose that Scorpio is back," he said, "and suppose that Dexter got what he wants—a deed to half the acreage—then what?"

"Then Scorpio is turned loose to go where he pleases. He has enough of your money left to get him out of the country."

Clay Livingston, gripping both sides of his chair, leaned forward. "Judge, judge, you ain't going to try to get our land out of us? You can do what you want for the others, but my land is going to stay mine, no matter—"

The judge looked at him, and there was that in his eyes which silenced all the violence of Livingston, and put out the fire of revolt that was kindling in all of the faces around the room.

"You can talk, Livingston," said the judge, "some other day and some other place. Now you'll listen to me. Dexter has us on the hip. Scorpio can hang me. He can hang others. You know who he can hang. Every one of you knows, or can guess. So I say that we're going to make out a joint deed, I've got the forms upstairs, and I'm going to fill them out, and every man of you is going to sign. Pete, ride after Steve Dinmont and get him back here." He turned to me. "You sit down and wait," he ordered.

With that he went out from the room, and we heard his heavy footfall climb the stairs. At the same time, the front door was pushed open, and Claudia Laffiter, flushed with hard riding, came in.

"Looks like Quakers' meeting," said she. "You look sick, all of you!"

Her glance swept round the company until it came to rest on me. Then she cried out to me, before them all, "Oh, I've ridden like mad all over the valley — all afternoon — all evening — and I couldn't find a trace of you. Tell me— tell me — is he all right? Is Charlie safe?"

I smiled back at her.

"He's as safe and sound as a bell," said I. "He's found Scorpio, made the fellow talk, and forced these people to their knees. Half of Dexter Valley is his, and the deed goes into his hands inside this hour. The judge is upstairs fixing the thing, right now."

It was a good deal of news to cram into a few words, and Claudia could hardly swallow it down. I suggested that she and I had better go outside and take a walk until the judge called us to receive his message.

That was what we did. We walked up and down through the woods in front of the house, woods which would all come back to Charlie Dexter, now.

"Is it really true?" the girl asked. "Did that—that man-killing Scorpio talk, at last? Has he really consented to turn State's evidence?"

"Not a bit," said I. "We got some testimony which he'll deny. We faked a signature. And we've bluffed the judge with it. Criminal? Perhaps. But the bluff has worked, and Judge Benson is in our pockets!"

WE HEARD Steven Dinmont returning, then heard him go again. Other men trooped out of the house and got their horses. Finally the judge called me and we went in. I shall never forget the tone of his voice, or the final words that I heard him speak.

"I've been beaten, Dean, so far," said he. "How much of a share you've had in it, I don't know. But I advise you to get out of this section of the country. Too many men are thinking hard thoughts about you."

"Thanks," said I, and took the thick wad of folded papers which he held out to me.

"It's a transfer of acreage, all legally watertight," said he. "You can look it over before you turn loose Scorpio."

I smiled and said that we probably would look, but that I was inclined to trust his word. Then he turned to the girl, and actually put his hand on her shoulder.

"Claudia," said he, almost kindly, "are you going to take a step in the dark?"

She said nothing at all. Her opinion of the judge was not particularly a gentle one, at that moment; but both she and I guessed that there was a double meaning. Claudia showed it when she got outside of the house. For then she insisted that she go back with me to Charlie.

When we got near to the shack, on the face of which the moon was now shining full, Claudia held back a little. She wanted me to go in and tell Charlie that she was there, and I, laughing a little at her embarrassment, rode on ahead.

I had barely left the trees and come into the clearing, when I saw Scorpio, his hands still tied behind his back, step into the open doorway. He was looking toward beautiful Compadre, and the stallion, as though recognizing its master, lifted its head and whinnied. It seemed a stroke of affection, though I knew how little love there was in that brute for any man. Then just as I was swinging down from the saddle, a rifle report rang out, and I saw Scorpio drop as though he had been struck down from behind by a club. He fell straight on his face.

Then came a second thunderclap that in an instant ripped across my scalp with a finger of tearing fire, and also flattened me on the ground. I lay there semi-conscious, as someone leaned over me.

A hand jerked the wad of papers from my pocket, and the voice of the judge growled, "You've got your hire at last, you cur!"

At the same time, it seemed as though the whole heavens was filled with shouting and the noise of firearms. I heard

the judge curse, his voice diminishing so that it showed he was sprinting away very fast. I got back some of my muscular control and pushed myself up on both hands.

Scorpio had not stirred. To my right, I saw the sheriff charging across the clearing on the mustang from which I had just dismounted, and firing at the line of trees ahead of him. Then another rider went past me like a flash. It was Dexter, who had mounted himself on Compadre. The stallion was not running, it was literally flying. I heard the long rhythm of his gallop in the distance, and my mind went wool-gathering again, after that.

When I came to a bit, a little later, it was to find Claudia washing the blood from my face. She told me that she had thought I was dead.

"I'm never going to die, Claudia," said I. "I'm going to live to get better sense. Of course they were following us. But what made them run? Surely they wanted to get Charlie more than they wanted to get me!"

"They didn't want you. They wanted the stuff in your pocket," she said. "And as for running, when they had a glimpse of the sheriff and Charlie at the same time, I suppose it was too much for them. It's the judge, and Manly Crowell. I saw them both."

At that moment, there was a faint groan from Scorpio.

We got to the wounded Mexican and turned him on his back. He had been shot straight through the body, under the heart. I knew very little about wounds, but I could guess from the position of this one that he was little better than a dead man.

Claudia gave me a nod, to say that my silent guess was right. We worked to make him die a little happier. We gave him a drink of brandy out of a little metal flask which I always have carried since my health grew weak, and in another moment he had opened those frightful eyes.

"Hello, Claudia," said he. "You ought to give a horse his head in the middle of a jump."

I thought it was the wandering brain of a dying man, but Claudia gave a little half cry, half sob. His memory, I learned afterward, had jumped back to the old days on the Dexter ranch, when he was cowpuncher there, and had given little Claudia Laffitter riding lessons.

He smiled, and continued to stare at her until the end, which came presently. There was a short convulsion. He sat up and gripped at his throat with both hands. That strange fantasy of the dual soul came back on him, and he gasped out, "Scorpio, Scorpio, you are choking me—devil!"

Then twisting over, he fell on his side and died.

We set there through a long silence until we heard the sound of horses in the trees. Was it Dexter and the sheriff, or had the other two come back?

"Charlie! Charlie!" cried Claudia.

And there he rode out from the woods alone. He dismounted, and the stallion Compadre stood quietly behind him.

Suddenly it struck me that that was poor Scorpio's life work—all the good that ever he had done, standing there at the back of Dexter, subdued and gentle.

"Tom Winchell?" gasped Claudia.

"He stayed behind—to arrange things," said Prince Charlie. "He thought I'd better come back to tell you. And Scorpio?"

We pointed, and Charlie Dexter went and stood for a long time looking down at the dead man's face, his hat in his hand. His bowed head gave him a certain air of reverence which I myself had felt for the better half of Scorpio's soul.

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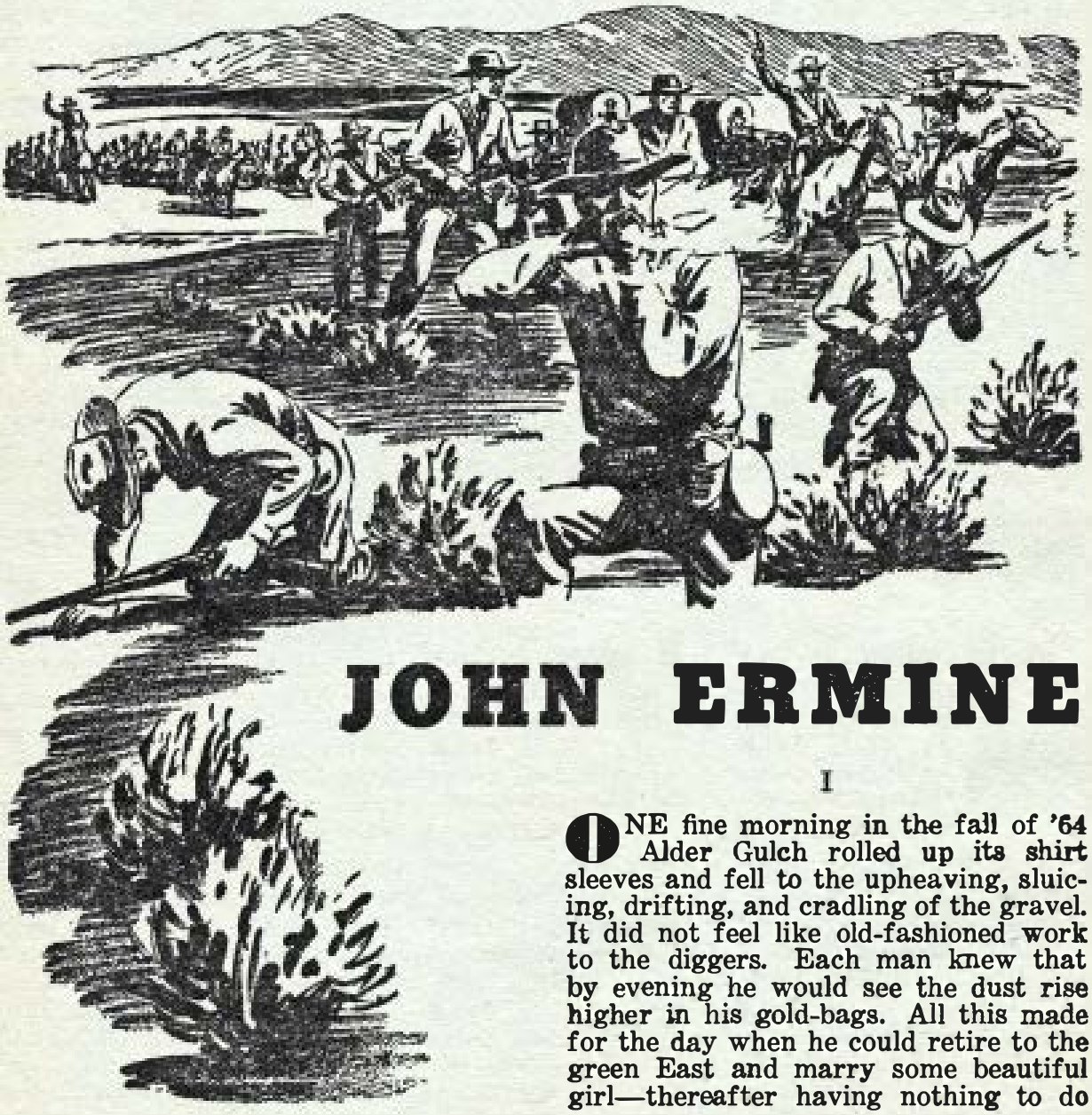
FREDERIC REMINGTON

He was a white man brought up by the Indians, but he became a fighting scout to help the Army smash the might of marauding Sioux tribesmen!



JOHN ERMINE

I

ONE fine morning in the fall of '64 Alder Gulch rolled up its shirt sleeves and fell to the upheaving, sluicing, drifting, and cradling of the gravel. It did not feel like old-fashioned work to the diggers. Each man knew that by evening he would see the dust rise higher in his gold-bags. All this made for the day when he could retire to the green East and marry some beautiful girl—thereafter having nothing to do

The zone of fire was concentrated on the nearest Indians (CHAP. VI)

of the YELLOWSTONE

but eat pie and smoke fragrant cigars. Life was hard at Alder in those days; and when its denizens became sentimental, it took these unlovely forms, sad to relate.

Notwithstanding the hundreds who toiled in the gulches, Virginia City itself held hurrying crowds—Mormon freighters, dirty men off the trails, Indians, Chinese, and almost everything else not angelic.

Into this bustle rode Rocky Dan, who, after dealing faro all night at the "Happy Days" shebang, had gone for a horseback ride through the hills to brighten his eyes and loosen his nerves. Striding into that unhallowed hall of Sheol, he sang out:

"Say, fellers, I've just seen a thing out in the hills which near knocked me off my horse. You couldn't guess what it was."

"What? A new thing, Dan? No! No! Dan, you wouldn't come here with anything good and blurt it out," said one rude patron of the "Happy Days" mahogany, vulturing about Rocky Dan. "I gamble it wasn't a murder. That wouldn't knock you off your horse, just to see one—hey, Dan?"

"No, no," vouched Dan, laboring under an excitement ill becoming a faro-dealer. "It was a boy!"

"Boy—boy—a boy?" echoed another. "A boy isn't exactly new, Dan."

"No, that's so," Dan admitted. "But this was a white boy."

"Well, that doesn't make him any newer," vociferated a third patron.

"No, but this was a white boy out in that Crow Injun camp, with yellow hair braided down the sides of his head, all the same as an Injun, and he had a bow and arrow, all the same as an Injun. And I said, 'Hello, little feller,' and he pulled his little bow on me, all the same as an Injun. The little cuss! He was about to let go on me. I was too near those Injuns, anyhow, but I was on the best quarter horse in the country, as you know, and willing to take my chance. Boys, he was white as Sandy McCalmont there, only he didn't have so many freckles."

The company regarded the designated one, who promptly blushed, and asked, "Well, what do you make of it, anyhow, Dan?"

"What do I make of it? Why, that those Injuns lifted that kid from some outfit, and that we ought to go out and bring him in."

"That's so," sang the crowd as it surged into the street, "Let's saddle up and go and get him."

THE story blew down the gulch on the seven winds. It appealed to the sympathies of all white men, and with double force to their hatred of the Indians. Business was suspended. Desperadoes trooped in with honest merchants and hardy miners as the strung-out cavalcade poured up the road to the plateau, where the band of Crows had pitched their tepees.

"Klat-a-way! Klat-a-way!"

The road narrowed near the top, and here the surging riders were stopped by a few men howling "Halt!"

A big man forced his pony up on the steep hillside and spoke in a loud, measured, and authoritative voice.

"Gentlemen, if this outfit goes a-charging into that bunch of Injuns, those Injuns are sure going to shoot at us, and we are naturally going to shoot back. Now, our esteemed friend, Mr. Chick-chick, savvies Injuns, he being somewhat their way himself. He allows that they will chill that poor little boy with a knife the first rattle out of the box. So, gentlemen, what good does it all do? Now, gentlemen, I allow if you all will keep down under the hill and back our play, Chick-chick and I will go into that camp and get the boy alive. If these Injuns rub us out, it's your move. All who agree to this motion will signify it by getting down off their horses."

Slowly man after man swung to the ground. Whereat the big man sang out: "Come on, Mr. Chick-chick."

These two rode up the hill and over the mesa, arriving in due course among the tepees. There were not probably a hundred warriors present, but they were all armed, horsed, and under considerable excitement. These Crows were at war with all the other tribes of the northern plains, but maintained a truce with the white man.

Mr. Chick-chick began hand-language, which was answered at great length. He was finally invited to smoke in the council lodge. The squaws were pulling down the tepees, roping, bundling, screaming, hustling ponies, children, and dogs about, unsettling the statesmen's nerves mightily as they passed the pipe. The big man began to fancy the Indians he had seen through the sights more than these he was regarding over the pipe of peace. Chick-chick gesticulated the proposition that the white papoose be brought into the tent, where he could be seen.

The Indians demurred, saying there was no white boy—that all in the camp

were Crows. A young warrior broke in, talking in a loud tone. An old chief looked out through the entrance-flap. Turning, he inquired what the white horsemen were doing outside.

"When the sun is so high," answered Chick-chick, pointing, and using the

JOHN ERMINE

sign language, "if we do not go forth with the boy, the white men will charge and kill all the Crows. One white boy is not worth that much."

After more excitement and talk, a youngish woman came, bearing a child in her arms.

The old chief stood the boy before Chick-chick. He was near nine years of age, the men judged, white beyond question, with long, golden hair braided, Indian fashion, down the sides of his head.

"He is a Crow. His skin is white, but his heart is Absaroke. It makes us bleed to see him go. Our women will mourn all this snow for him, but to save my band I give him to you. Take him."

Chick-chick lifted the child in his arms. Then, mounting, he and his companion withdrew toward their friends. The council tepee fell in the dirt—a dozen squaws tugging at its voluminous folds. The small hostage was not many yards on his way toward his own kind before the Indian camp moved off toward the mountains, urging their horses with whip and lance. This movement was accelerated by a great discharging of white men's guns, in celebration of the advent of the white child unharmed. He was indeed unharmed as to body, but his feelings had been torn to shreds. He added shrill protesting yells to the rejoicing.

Chick-chick, or Chickens, as the miners often called him, had not entered the expedition because of his love for children, or the color of this one in particular. So, at the suggestion of the big man, it was turned over to a benevolent saloon-keeper, who had nine notches in his gun, and a woman with whom he abided. "Gold Nugget," as he was promptly named by the diggers and freighters, was supposed to need a woman, as it was adjudged that only such could induce him to cease his yells.

By the time the cavalcade reached town, the infant had been overcome by his exertions and was silent. They sat him on the bar of his godfather's saloon, where dirt-begrimed men shouldered their brawny way through the crowd to have a look at him—the lost white child in the Indian dress. Many drinks and pistol shots were offered up in his honor, and he, having recovered somewhat, resumed his vocal protests; whereupon the saloon-keeper's female friend was given charge. Taking him to her little house back of the saloon, the child found milk and bread and feminine caresses to calm him until he slept. It was publicly proclaimed by the nine-notch saloon-keeper that the first man who passed the door of the kid's domicile would be number ten to his gun.

This pronunciamiento insured much needed repose to Gold Nugget during the night.

IN THE morning he was partially recovered from fears and tears. The women patted his face, fed him to bursting, fingered the beautiful plaits of his yellow hair, and otherwise showed that they had not surrendered all their feminine sensibilities to their tumultuous lives. As for the male population of the Gulch, they voted the newcomer the greatest thing that ever happened. They took him into partnership, speculated on his previous career, and drank his health.

Then, on one of the same mountain winds which had heralded his coming was borne down the Gulch next morning the tragic words, "The kid has gone!"

"Gone?" said the miners. "Gone where?"

Alder promptly dropped its pick, buckled on its artillery, and assembled before the nine-notch man. "Where has the kid gone?" it demanded.

His woman stood beside the bar, wild-eyed. "I don't know, gentlemen. He was playing by the door of my shack last evening. I went in the house for a minute, and when I came out he was gone!"

* * * * *

For many days the Absaroke trotted and bumped along ceaselessly beating their ponies' sides with their heels, and lashing with their elk-horn whips. With their packs and travoix they could not move fast, but they made up for this by long hours of industrious plodding. An Indian is never struck without striking back, and his counter always comes when not expected. They wanted to maneuver their women and children, so that many hills and broad valleys would lie between them and their vengeance when it should be taken. Through the deep canyons, among the dark pine trees, out across the bold table-lands, through the rivers of the mountains, wound the long cavalcade, making its way to the chosen valley of Crowland, where their warriors mustered in numbers to secure them from all thought of fear of the white men.

The braves burned for vengeance on the white fools who dug in the Gulch they were leaving behind, but the yellow-eyed people were all brothers. To strike the slaves of the gravel-pits would be to make trouble with the rivermen, who brought up the powder and guns in boats every green-grass. The tribal policy was against such a rupture. The Crows, or Sparrowhawks as they called themselves, were already encompassed by their enemies, and only able by the most desperate endeavors to hold their own hunting-grounds against the Blackfeet, Sioux, and Cheyennes. The powder and guns to defend these lands could only be had from the white traders, so they made a virtue of necessity and held their hand.

Before many days the squaw Ba-cher-hish-a rode among the lodges with little White Weasel sitting behind her, dry-eyed and content.

Alder had lost Gold Nugget, but the Indians had White Weasel—so things were mended.

His foster-mother—the one from whom the chief had taken him—had stayed behind the retreating camp, stealing about unseen. She wore the wolf-skin over her back, and in those days no one paid any attention to a wolf. In the dusk of evening she had lain near the shack where her boy was housed, and at the first opportunity she had seized him and fled.

The old men Nah-kee and Umbas-a-hoos sat smoking over their talk in the purple shade of a tepee. Idly noting the affairs of camp, their eyes fell on groups of small urchins, which were scampering about engaging each other in mimic war. They shot blunt-headed arrows.

"See, brother," spoke Nah-kee, "the little white Crow has been struck in the face by an arrow, but he does not stop."

"*Umph*—he will make a warrior," replied the other. "He may be a war-chief—he leads the boys even now, before he is big enough to climb up the fore leg of a pony to get on its back. The arrow in his face did not stop him. These white men cannot endure pain as we do. They bleat like a deer under the knife. Brother, little White Weasel is a Crow."

"It is so," pursued the other veteran. "These yellow-eyes are only fit to play badger in a gravel-pit or harness themselves to loaded boats, which pull powder and lead up the long river. If it were not for their medicine goods, we would drive them far away."

"Yes, brother, they are good for us. If we did not have their powder and guns, the Cut-Throats (Sioux) and the Cut-Arms (Cheyennes) would soon put the Absaroke fires out. We must step carefully and keep our eyes open lest the whites again see White Weasel. And if these half-Indian men about camp talk to the traders about him, we will have the camp soldiers beat them with sticks. The white traders would take our powder away from us unless we gave him to them."

"We could steal him again, brother."

"Yes, if they did not send him down the long river in a boat. Then he would go so far toward the morning that we should never pass our eyes over him again on this side of the Spiritland. We need him to fill the place of some warrior who will be struck by the enemy."

Seeing the squaw Ba-cher-hish-a passing they called to her and said: "When there are any white men around the camps, paint the face of your little son White Weasel, and fill his hair with wood ashes. If you are careful to do this, the white men will not notice him; you will not have to part with him again."

"What you say is true," spoke the squaw, "but I cannot put black ashes in his eyes." She departed, nevertheless, glorious with the new thought.

II

WITH the years White Weasel spindled up into a youth whose legs quite naturally fitted around the barrel of a horse. Having observed this, one night his foster-father said to him:

"You are old enough, my son, to be trusted with my ponies out in the hills. Go, then, when the morning comes, with your brother, and watch my herd. See that they feed safely; see that by evening they come to the lodges. You are old enough now to wear the loin-cloth; you must begin to be a man."

And so, before the sun rose again, White Weasel was one of the many noisy boys who ran about among the horses, trailing his lariat to throw over some pony which he knew. By a fortunate jerk he curled it about one's neck, the shy creature crouching under its embracing fold, knowing full well the awful strangle which followed opposition. With ears forward, the animal watched the naked youth, as he slowly approached him along the taut rope, saying softly: "Eh-ah-hh—um-m-um-m—eh-h-h."

Tying the rope on the horse's jaw, with a soft spring he fixed himself on its back, tucking his loin-cloth under him. Now he moved to the outskirts of the thronging horses, crying softly to them as he and his brother separated their father's stock from that of the neighbor herds. He had done this before, but he had never been responsible for the outcome.

Daylight found the boys sitting quietly, as they sped along beside the herd of many-colored ponies.

"Brother," spoke his companion to the white boy, "we must never shut our eyes. The Cut-Arms are everywhere. They come out of the sky, they come out of the ground to take our horses. You must watch the birds floating in the air. They will speak to you about the bad Indians, when you learn their talk. You must watch the wolves and the buffalo, and above all, the antelope. These any one can understand. We must not let the ponies go near the broken land or the trees. The ponies themselves are fools, yet, if you will watch them, you will see them turn slowly away from an enemy, and often looking back, pointing with their ears. It may be only a bear which they go away from; for the ponies are fools—they are afraid of everything.

"The grass has been eaten off here by these buffalo, and the ponies wander. I will ride to the high hill, while you, brother, bring the herd slowly. Watch me, brother; I may give the sign of danger." Saying which, the older boy loped gracefully on ahead.

And so as the days wore on, the birds and the wild animals talked to White Weasel, and he understood. Then came

December, the month of the cold moon. Weasel's brother, being older, had at last succumbed to the thirst for glory. He had gone with some other boys to try his fortune on other people's horses, and Weasel was left alone with the herd. His father often helped him to take the ponies out to good grazing, and then left him.

The Absaroke had been sore pressed by the Indians out on the plains, and had retired to the Chew-cara-ash-Nitishic or Big Horn Basin country, where the salt-weed grew. Here they could be pushed no farther. Aided by the circling wall of mountain, their own courage, and their fat horses, they could maintain themselves. Their scouts lay far out, and the camp felt as much security as a wild people can ever feel.

One day, as usual, Weasel had taken his ponies far away to fresh feed, that near the camps having been eaten off. The day was bright, but heavy, dense clouds drifted around the surrounding mountain-tops, and later they crawled slowly down their sides. Weasel noticed this as he sat shivering in his buffalo-robe. Also he noticed far away other horse herds moving slowly toward the Arsha-Nitishic, along whose waters lay the camp of his people. He began to gather his ponies and rode circling about. They acted wildly—strung out and began to run. Glancing about, Weasel saw many big gray wolves loping in unison with his charges.

As Weasel turned his nervous eye about him, he knew that he had never seen so many wolves before. He had seen dozens and dozens, but not so many as these. They were coming in nearer to the horses—they were losing their fear. The horses were running—heads up, and blowing with loud snorts. Weasel's pony needed no whip. His dorsal action was swift and terrific.

The wolves did not seem to pay particular attention to him—they rather minded the herd. They gathered in great numbers at the head of the drove. Weasel could have veered off and out of the chase. He thought of this, but his blue eyes opened bravely and he rode along. A young colt, having lost its mother, ran out of the line of horses, uttering whinnies. Instantly a dozen gray forms covered its body, which sank with a shriek, as Weasel flashed by.

THE leading ponies stopped suddenly and ran circling, turning their tails to the wolves, kicking and squealing viciously. The following ones closed up into the compact mass of horses, and Weasel rode, last of all, into the midst of them. What had been a line of rushing horses two arrow-flights long before, was now a closely packed mass of animals which could have been covered by a lariat. In the middle of the bunch sat Weasel, with his legs drawn up to avoid the crushing horses. It was all very strange. It had happened so quickly that he could not comprehend. He had never been told about this. Were they really wolves, or spirits sent by the Bad Gods to destroy the boy and his horses?

All his waking hours had been spent with the ponies; he knew no other world; he had scarcely had any other thoughts. He was with them now, but instead of his protecting them they were protecting him. With their tails turned toward the circling mass of devil-animals, they struck and lashed when attacked. Nothing was heard but the snap of teeth, the stamp of hoofs, the shrill squealing of horses, with an occasional thud followed by a yelp. The departing sun stole for a moment through a friendly rift in the clouds, encrimsoning the cold snow, and then departed, leaving the gray tragedy to the spirits of the night.

That night, the boy not having returned with the ponies, his foster-father speculated endlessly. Long before day he was mounted, and with a small party far on the way to the herd-grounds which he had chosen the day before.

As the plain began to unfold itself to their straining eyes, a snarling, a horse-squealing, a curious medley of sounds, bore on them. "It is the wolves," said they, almost in a chorus. Forward with a rush, a shrill yelling, and firing, swept the little party, and saw the solid mass of horses, with the wolves scurrying away on all sides. A faint answering human whoop came from the body of the beleaguered horse band.

As the rescuers rode up, the ponies

spread out from each other. Relieved from the pressure of the slimy fangs, the poor animals knew that men were better than wolves. Some of them were torn and bloody about the flanks; a few lay still on the snow with their tendons cut; but best of all which the Indians saw, was little White Weasel sitting in the midst of the group. His brave, deep eyes were open, and showed no emotion. He had passed the time of fear, and he had passed the time for hope, long hours ago.

They lifted him from his horse, and laid him on the ground, covered with many robes, while willing hands kneaded his marbled flesh. Little Weasel spoke weakly:

"The Sak-a-war-te, the Great Spirit came to me in the night, father. The cold wind whispered to me that White Weasel must always carry a hoof of the white stallion in his medicine-bag. 'It is the thing that will protect you,' said the wind. The white stallion lies over there—cut down behind. Kill him, and give me one of his rear hoofs, father."

Accordingly, the noble beast, leader of the horses in battle, was relieved of what was, at best, useless suffering, and his wolf-smashing hoof did useful things for many years afterward. And White Weasel's tough body soon recovered from the freezing night's battle between the animals.

One evening, as the family to which White Weasel belonged sat about the blaze of the split sticks in their lodge, Fire-Bear, the medicine-man, entered, and sat down to smoke his talk with the faster-father. Between the long puffs he said:

"Crooked-Bear wants us to bring the white Absaroke to him. Will you go with me and take the boy? The Absaroke must do as the Crooked-Bear says, brother. The old man of the mountain is strong."

After blinking and smoking for a time the foster-father said: "The boy's and Crooked-Bear's skins are of the same color; they are both Sparrowhawks in their hearts. I fear to go, brother, but must if he ask it. We will be ready when the morning comes."

When the dark teeth of the eastern mountains bit into the gray of approaching day, the two old Indians and the boy were trotting along, one behind the other. The boy had often heard of, but never seen, the great Crow medicine-man up in the mountains near where the tribe hovered. He seldom came to the lodges, but the Indians frequently visited him. He was one of the tribal institutions, a matter of course. And while his body was denied them, his advice controlled in the councils. His words were the words from God.

Hours of slow winding took them high up on the mountains, until they were

The soldiers welcomed the steamboat (CHAP. VIII)

among the pines. Making their way over fallen logs, around jagged boulders, they suddenly dropped into a small wooded valley, then up to the foot of the towering terraces of bare rock, checkered with snow, where nothing came in winter, not even the bighorns.

SOON Weasel could smell fire, then dogs barked in the woods up in front. Fire-Bear called loudly and was answered. Going forward, they came first to the dogs—huge, bold creatures—bigger and different than any Weasel had ever seen. Then he made out the figure of a man, softly massed against the snow, and beside him a cabin made of logs set against the rock wall.

This was Crooked-Bear. The big dogs approached without barking—a bad sign with dogs. Then in response to strange words from the white medicine-man they drew away.

Weasel sat on his pony while the older men dismounted and greeted Crooked-Bear. Presently, in response to the motion of his father's hand, the boy slid off his pony. Taking him by the shoulder, the father drew him slowly toward Crooked-Bear until they were directly in each other's presence. Weasel's eyes could open no farther. He had not forgotten Virginia City, and he had seen the traders at the post; he had seen the few white or half-white men who lived with his people. But they were not like this one.

The old man of the mountains was crooked as his name implied. He also suggested a bear. He was humpbacked. His arms and legs were as other men's are, though his shortened body made his hands fall to his knees.

He was dressed in Indian buckskin, leaned on a long breech-loading rifle, and carried a huge knife and revolver in his belt. His hat was made of wolf-skin after the Indian fashion, from underneath which fell long brown hair, carefully combed, in profuse masses. Seen closely he was not old—merely past middle life. Seen closely, too, the whole face was open, the eyes mild, and all about it was reposeful.

Weasel warmed under the gaze of the kind face—the eyes said nothing but good. They did more than that: they compelled Weasel to step forward toward the strange figure, who put his hand on the boy's shoulder and led him tenderly in the direction of the cabin door.

As the men stooped almost on hands and knees to enter the den of Crooked-Bear, they were greeted by the acrid smell of smouldering ashes. Crooked-Bear stirred the ashes and laid split wood on them. It was pine which spat and broke out in a bright flame, illumining a buffalo-covered bunk, cooking pots and pans on the hearth, a table and chair made with an axe, and in one corner some shelves, equally rude, piled with brown and dirty books. A Sharps rifle stood in the corner.

"Your ponies must starve tonight, brother," spoke Crooked-Bear. "Go put them in my house where the horses live in summer-time. It is cold up here in the mountains—we have even no cottonwoods for them to eat. The bear and the wolves will not spring on them, though the big cats are about."

While the Indians looked after their ponies, the white man roasted meat and boiled coffee. On their return, seeing him cooking, Fire-Bear said:

"Brother, you should have a squaw to do that. Why do you not take Be-Sha's daughter? She would make your fire."

"Tut, tut," Crooked-Bear replied, "no woman would make my fire burn. My fire has gone out."

Having eaten, and passed the pipe, Fire-Bear asked the hermit how the winter was passing—how the dry meat was lasting—what fortune had he in hunting, and had any enemies beset him? He was assured his good friends, the Absaroke, had brought him enough dry meat, after the last fall hunt, to last him until he should no longer need it. The elk were below him, but plentiful, and his big dogs were able to haul enough up the hills on his sleds. He only feared for his tobacco, coffee, and ammunition. That had always to be husbanded, being difficult to get and far to carry. Further, he asked his friend, the Indian, to take some rawhides back to the women, to be dressed and made into clothes for his use.

"Has my brother any more talking papers from the yellow-eyes? Do the

white men mean to take the Sioux lands away from them? The Sioux asked the Absaroke last fall to help drive the white men out of the country, saying, 'If they take our lands to dig their badger-holes in, they will soon want yours.' The Absaroke would not help the Cut-Throats; for they are dogs—they wag their tails before they bite," spoke Fire-Bear.

"Yes, brother," replied Crooked-Bear. "If you should by aiding the Sioux, get rid of the white men, you would still have the Sioux, who are dogs, always ready to bite you. No, brother, have nothing to do with them, as I have counseled you. The Great Spirit has said to me: 'Tell the Absaroke that they can never run the buffalo on the plains in peace, until the Chis-chis-chash, the Dakotahs, and the Piegan dare not look them in the face. That, and that only, is the path.' "

FAR into the night the men talked of the tribal policy. As Crooked-Bear sat on his hewn chair, he called the boy to him, put his arm around him, and stood him against his knee. The youth's head rose above the rugged face of the master of Indian mystery. He was in his first youth. His slender bones had lengthened suddenly in the last few years, and the muscles had tried hard to catch up with them. They had not time to do more than that, consequently Weasel was more beautiful than he would ever be again. The long lines of grace showed under the tight buckskins, and his face surveyed the old man with boyish wonder. Who can know what the elder thought of him in return? Doubtless he dreamed of the infinite possibilities of so fine a youth. He whose fire had gone out mused pleasantly as he long regarded the form in whom they were newly lighted.

Slowly he began to speak. "Brother, we have lived a long time. We have made the medicine strong for the Absaroke. But soon we will follow the others who have gone to the Shadow-land. The Absaroke will be left behind, and they must have wise men to guide them when we are gone. This young man will be one of those—I have seen that in my dreams. He must stay here with me in the lonely mountains, and I will teach him the great mystery of the white men, together with that of the people of his own tribe. Then some day the tribe will lean on him. Shall he stay, brothers?"

Fire-Bear spoke: "Your talk is good. The Sak-a-war-te demands this. The boy shall stay."

"Will you stay with me?" asked the Wonder-Worker of the boy, stroking his yellow hair.

"I will stay, Father," the boy replied.

III

BATHED in crimson, the sun rose the next morning. Waking, one by one, the men threw off the robes and went out, but the boy lay sleeping.

Out by the stable Crooked-Bear said: "Take your ponies and that of the boy and ride away. A boy changes his mind very quickly, and he may not think in the sunlight what he did in the firelight. I will be kind to him. Tell Bacher-hish-a that her son will be a great chief in a few grasses."

Silently, as only the cats and the wolves and the Indians conduct themselves, the men with the led horses lost themselves among the trees, leaving Crooked-Bear standing at the entrance to his abode. Weasel awoke, and as he rose to a sitting posture on the bunk, two dogs, great cross-bred mastiffs, got up also.

"Down with you! Down with you, Eric! and you, Hope! You must not bother the boy!" The hermit's words of command came sharply. The dogs understood, and lay heavily down.

"I am afraid of your dogs, Father; they are as big as ponies. Will they eat me?"

"No, do not be afraid. Before the sun goes over the mountains they will eat any one who would raise his hand against you. Come, put your hand on their heads. The Indians do not do this. But these are white dogs, and they will not bite any one who can put his hand on their heads." Crooked-Bear had spoken in the Indian tongue.

He put breafast on the table, and White Weasel was persuaded to undertake his first development. The hermit

knew that the mind never waits on a starved stomach, so he explained to the boy that only dogs ate on the ground. That was not obvious to the youngster but he sat in the chair and mauled his piece of meat, which was in a tin plate. He drank his coffee out of a tin cup, which he could see was full better than a hollow buffalo horn, besides having the extra blandishment of sugar in it.

As the hermit, occupying an upturned pack-saddle opposite, regarded the boy, he could see that Weasel had a full forehead—that it was not pinched like an Indian's. He understood the deep, wide-open eyes which were the color of new ice, and the straight, solemn nose appealed to him also. The bearer of these messages from his ancestors to Crooked-Bear quite satisfied him. He knew that the baby Weasel had been forcibly made to enter a life from which he himself had in mature years voluntarily fled—because he had a crooked back, and the woman he had loved had mocked at it—and for which neither was intended. They had entered from opposite doors only, and he did not wish to go out again, but the boy might. He determined to show him the way to undo the latching.

After breakfast the boy slept again. When he awoke, the second lesson of the white man's mystery began. The hermit said, "My son, did you ever make a gun speak?"

"No. My father's gun hangs with his mystery-bag on his reclining-mat, and a woman or child dare not lay their fingers on it."

"Would you like to make a gun talk?" Crooked-Bear took up a carbine. "Here is a gun. It loads in the middle. I give it to you; it is yours." With which he handed the weapon to the boy. "Tomorrow I will take my gun, and you will take your gun, and we will walk the hills together. Whatever we see, be it man or beast, your gun may speak first," proposed the prophet.

"Yes, Father, we will go out with the coming of the sun. My heart is as big as the mountains. Only yesterday I was a herd-boy, now I own a gun. This brought it all to me." The boy fumbled in a small bag hanging at his neck. The bag contained the dried horse's hoof.

The prophet shook his head. "No, my son, that was not your medicine which brought the gun. The medicine of the white man brought the gun to you because the Great Spirit knew you were a white boy. The medicine of the white man is not carried in a buckskin bag; it is carried here." And the prophet laid his finger on his brow.

Bright and early was the start of the hunters in the morning. They left the dogs in the cabin, and with snow-shoes slung to their backs, followed down the sledge-trail toward the bare foothills, where the game was. Far out on the plain their trained eyes saw bands of antelope, and, nearer, herds of mule-deer working about in the ravines. "But," said the boy, "my first shot must be at an elk or a bighorn, Father."

"Come then, my son, we will go round this point of the hill, and on the sunny southern slope we will find the elk—great bands of them. You shall shoot one, and when you have done that, the herd-boy will be a hunter."

AS HAD been predicted, in due course of their walk they beheld bands of elk lying about or walking slowly, their yellow backs gleaming in the morning sun. The warm winds from the valleys were coming up toward the arctic mountain-tops and away from the elk. "Take off your snow-shoes, my son. They creak on the snow and the elk will hear them. We must go down this ravine, and when we are near enough, you will shoot."

Under cover of the rocks and sparse pines they slowly made their noiseless way. The canyon-like ravine which they were following narrowed suddenly. The snow lay in deep drifts against its sides, making it necessary for them to go slowly along the ledges of the rim-rock, the boy always first. As they were about to round the point where the coulée tightened, a big yellow form drifted like a wind-blown feather on to them; it suddenly appeared not twenty feet from their faces, and it was a mountain-lion.

The men straightened as the cougar crouched. The cat bared its fangs, the boy raised his carbine. The coulée echoed with the heavy report, and

As the horse went down, Louise saw the girl go flying out of the saddle (CHAP. IX)

through the enveloping smoke flew the great cat as though also impelled by gunpowder. The boy had not missed his mark, and the lion his only by a small margin. The steep snowdrift yielded under his frantic claws, carrying him many yards down the sides.

"Load your gun and shoot him, Weasel; I shall not shoot," came the hermit's voice. The position of his long rifle belied his words, but the youth did not look behind. He fumbled for a cartridge, was slow in working the strange mechanism of the arm, but he was ready by the time the cat, much frustrated by the unresisting snow, had nearly reached him. Again the canyon chorused to the rifle, and as the heavy black powder-smoke drifted off on the friendly wind, the boy saw that he had killed.

"Load your gun," came the voice of command in English. The new language struck Weasel's brain through his ear as his bullet had struck the monster. The sound of it was what conveyed the meaning, and the harsh bang of the words went home. Weasel again broke his rifle and shoved the brass shell home, never looking elsewhere than at the yellow spot of fur on the white snow below him, as its fierce electric nerves softened its expiring motions into quiet.

He had never had even a dream of victory such as had taken form before him. He had known old Indian hunters who rode on a lion's skin in the ceremonial days, and he knew what warriors in the tribe wore the grizzly bear-claw necklaces. Could it be that he would

ride on a lion's skin? Could it be that he would carry a gun which loaded in the middle? What a vista of power and glory opened in the boy's mind! What vanity of his could not yet be satisfied?

"Boy," said the hermit, "this was a white man's medicine-hunt. Could any Indian do that for you?" But the boy heeded not. With a series of wolfish yells he slid down the snowy incline toward his fallen foe. The hermit followed. Drawing their knives, they raised the hide while the body was yet warm, taking head and tail and claws. Weasel was delirious with joy; the old man smiled. He would make him begin his English now.

Gradually in the days that followed, the man brought English words into the play of conversation, and Weasel sought the key to the white medicine which had so exalted him. The nouns came first, and he soon began to piece them out with other parts of speech. His ear accustomed itself, and with it all came new and larger thoughts carefully strewn in his way by the prophet.

One day when the buds of the leaves were beginning to show themselves, the dogs barked furiously. The two dwellers of the cabin seized their rifles, ran out, and waited. Before long they heard challenges in the well-known Absaroke, which they answered.

"Do not talk English to your people, my son; they will not understand," said the hermit. What he feared was their suspicion of the transformation of the lad. The Absaroke, no more than the Dakotahs, understood or loved the white man; they merely tolerated him for tribal reasons.

The newcomers were a dozen chiefs of the tribe, the boy's Indian father among them. They drove a few led ponies belonging to Crooked-Bear, which they were returning after their wintering with the Absaroke herds.

Long and seemingly interminable talks followed the pipe about the prophet's blazing hearth. He filled their minds with strong, sensible advice, reënforcing it by supposed inspired sources, until the tobacco which he had appropriated for such occasions gave out. It was a cheap and in fact the only way by which he could purchase immunity from violence—a safe wintering for his ponies and his fall supply of dried buffalo meat.

HIS influence was boundless, and while he hoped quite as much as the Indians that the white men would never come to these parts during his lifetime, he also knew that they would. He heard reports that the miners were invading the Sioux territory from the south. He knew gold, and he knew white men, and he realized what the combination always produced. In this strait he saw that the efforts of the Sioux would be so taxed to oppose the progress that the Absaroke would profit by their preoccupation. His revelations always favored the alliance between the Absaroke and the yellow-eyes.

The long palaver terminated with the Indians' promise to send out war-parties against the other tribes. The Weasel was not able to resist a very natural desire to go again to the camps, to visit his foster-mother, the boys of his childhood, and deeper yet to bear the gun and the lion's skin. So when the party departed, White Weasel went with them.

* * * * *

One day, at the beginning of summer, the boy returned to the hermit's nest—was barked at, challenged, and finally greeted. There was an eagle feather in his hair, hanging down behind. He led the pony loaned by the prophet, which bore a bunch of buckskins, and was mounted on a fine animal, quite in the warrior class, with a new elkhorn saddle. His panther skin was rolled behind him. Dismounting, he carefully undid this, and from its folds drew forth a scalp—a braid of long hair, the skin stretched on a wooden ring and half covered down the plat with silver disks made of pounded silver dollars.

"It was a Dakotah, father, and I put his fire out with the medicine gun you gave me. I have danced it with the warriors. I am a warrior now."

The old man's worst fears had been realized, but after eating he had the story from White Weasel.

"When I reached the village," the boy said, "Long-Horse was making up a

party to go to the Dakotahs, and I asked to be one of them. We made the war-path medicine and traveled many sleeps with our backs to the sun. One morning our scouts found two men, an Absaroke and a white man, and brought them in. They belonged to the white warriors' camp, which was fighting the Dakotahs, who were all around them, and these men were going for help. Long-Horse moved toward this place guided by the men we had met. Before the sun was up, the Absaroke rode into the camp of the white soldiers, and they were glad to see us; for when the sun gave light, we could see the Cut-Throats swarm on their hill as the ants do when you lift a stone. There were five Cut-Throats to one white soldier, and they had guns.

"Long-Horse and the white chief, a big man with short hair, made a long talk. The Absaroke gave their old traveling-ponies to the white warriors, who put their own saddles on them. When we were ready, we charged the enemy, and they fled before us. We followed them until they gained the rough hills. We fired at the Dakotahs, and they fired at us, they always working backward in the rough canyons, where we were afraid to follow on horseback because Long-Horse said they were trying to lead us into an ambuscade.

"All day we fought, although very few were killed. At night the white soldiers and many Absaroke rode swiftly back to the camp. Long-Horse with half of the Absaroke stopped in the strong woods high up on one side of a ravine, and I stayed with them. I had only four cartridges left. All night we lay there and allowed their scouts to go down the canyon without firing on them.

"In the early morning we heard the Dakotahs coming. They rode down the cut before our faces, not knowing we were there. When Long-Horse gave his war-whoop, we all fired, and jumping on our ponies charged into them. The ground was covered with dying horses and men. My heart grew big, Father. Everything before my eyes swam red, and I do not remember much except that I rode behind a big Dakotah and shot him in the back. I shot him again before he died, and then I took his hair. I chased his pony, the fine war-horse which is out in the stable. The Dakotahs who were not killed had all run away. So I ran the dead man's pony back to camp, where with the help of other Indians I caught him. Long-Horse was killed, and a few Absaroke wounded, but we got many scalps, one of which is mine.

"The white soldiers took me to their lodge and gave me coffee which was heavy with sugar. They spoke your language to me, but I could not understand much of it. My color is the same as theirs, father. Many of them had hair like mine, though they cut it short. I am a Crow, but I do not understand these things."

CAUTIOUSLY the hermit approached. "Your heart warms to the white man, does it not, my son?"

"Yes, all white men are good to me. They give me everything I want. They are rich, and their hearts are big. Some day I am going to Ashar-Ra (Fort Ellis), where the white soldiers live. They told me that when I came they would load my pony down with gifts. But I must first learn to talk as you do, Father."

Here, at last, was light to brighten the hopes of the hermit. "Yes, you must work hard with me now to speak as the white men do. You are a white man, though you were brought up by the Absaroke, and you will go back to your own people some day. The more you see them, the better you will like them."

"Why must I go to the white people, Father? You do not go to them, and you are a white man."

The hunchback hermit leaned with his head on his hands for a long time. He had not foreseen this. Finally, "You will go because they are your own people. You will join them when they fight the Sioux. You will grow to be a white chief and own many wagons of coffee and sugar. Some day, Weasel, you will want a white woman for a wife. You have never seen a white woman. They are not like these red squaws. They are as beautiful as the morning, and some day one of them will build a fire in your heart which nothing but death can put out.

"From now on I shall no longer call you White Weasel, but will give you a white name. I will call you John Ermine. That is a good strong white name. When you are asked what it is, do not say White Weasel. Say, 'My name is John Ermine.' Like this: 'My—name—is—John Ermine.'" And the prophet cut the words apart with the forefinger.

John Ermine tried his name again and again, together with other simple expressions.

"And why is your name Crooked-Bear, which is Indian, while you are white?" he asked.

"My name is not Crooked-Bear except to the Indians. My name is Richard Livingston Merril, though I have not heard the sound of it in many snows and do not care to hear it in many more. You can call me Comrade; that is my name when you speak."

Sitting by their cabin door in the flecked sunlight which the pine trees distributed, the two waded carefully across the lines of some well-thumbed book, taking many perilous flying leaps over the difficult words, but going swiftly along where it was unseasoned Saxon.

At other times the prophet talked of many marvels. White Weasel had heard men speak about the talking-wire and fire-wagon, but he did not believe the tales. John Ermine had more faith, although it puzzled him sorely. Raptly he listened to the long accounts of the many wonders back in the States, and his little Sioux scalp took a new significance as he tried hard to comprehend ten thousand men dying in a single battle of the Great White man's war.

Ten thousand dead men was a severe strain on his credulity when Crooked-Bear imposed it upon him. When were the white men coming to the Indian lands? he asked.

"Before you have a mustache, John Ermine, they will come in numbers as great as the grasshoppers, but you will not care. You are a white man."

Last but not least the prophet removed himself from his Indian pedestal in full sight of his ward. He was no prophet. He was only a man, and a poor specimen at that. Simply, and divested of much perplexity, he taught the Christian religion. He told the story of Jesus, and had John Ermine repeat the Ten Commandments, which last the teacher could only marshal after many days of painful reflection, so vagrant are most men's memories as age creeps on.

IV

FOUR years were passed by John Ermine in the cabin of the old man of the mountains, varied by visits to the Absaroke, which grew less frequent as he progressed along the white man's road. The Sioux and Cheyennes meanwhile were increasingly pressed by the white tide from the south. It came curling in, roller after roller, despite the treaties with their government and in spite of the Indians who rode the country, harassing the invaders. The gold under their feet drew the huge, senseless, irresistible mass of white humanity upon them. Finally, when the reprisals of the Indians fused the white soldiers with the gold-hunters, it was war.

Long columns of "pony soldiers" and "walk-a-heaps" and still longer lines of canvas-topped wagons trailed snakelike over the buffalo range.

The redmen hovered and swooped and burned the dry grass ahead of them, but the fire-spitting ranks crawled nearer always, pressing the Sioux into the country of the Crows, where great camps were formed to resist the soldiers. The poor Crows fled before them, going into the mountain valleys and inaccessible places to escape the war-ardor of the now thoroughly enraged enemy.

One day, through the shimmering heat, came Wolf-Voice, a messenger, with the tale how the Sioux had made a "surround" of the pony soldiers on the Ease-ka-poy-tot-chee-archa-cheer or Little Big Horn, and covered a hill with their bodies. But said this one: "Still the soldiers come crawling into the country from all sides. The Sioux and the buffalo run between them. I am going down the Yellowstone to help the white men. The soldiers make a scout rich."

Crooked-Bear spoke: "John Ermine, now it is time for you to play a man's part. You must go with Wolf-Voice to the soldiers. Go down the valley of the

Yellowstone with Wolf-Voice. If the Sioux do not cut you off, you will find the soldiers. Enlist as a scout. I am sure they will take you."

The young man had felt that this hour would arrive, and now that it had come he experienced a particular elation. Early evening found him at the door of the cabin, mounted on one horse and leading his war-pony beside him. The good-by word was all; no demonstration on the part of either man to indicate feelings, although both Ermine and the hermit were conscious of the seriousness of the parting. The horses disappeared among the trees, and the hermit sat down before his hut, intent at the blank space left by the riders.

Wolf-Voice and John Ermine rode silently, one behind the other, trailing their led ponies. The hoofs of their horses going out in sound on the pine-needles, crackling a dead branch as they stepped over fallen timber, or grunting under the strain of steep hillsides. Far across the wide valley the Shoshone range suddenly lost its forms and melted into blue-black against the little light left by the sun, which sank as a stone does in water. In swift pursuit of her warrior husband, came She of the night, soft and golden, painting everything with her quiet, restful colors, and softly soothing the fevers of day with her cooling lotions.

The two men emerged from the woods, dog-trotting along on their ponies after the fashion of Indian kind. Well they knew the deceptions of the pale light. While it illumined the way a few steps ahead, it melted into a protecting gloom within an arrow's-flight. An unfortunate meeting with the enemy would develop a horse-race where numbers counted for no more than the swiftest horse and the rider who quirted most freely.

However, the two riders traversed the plains without incident, forded the rivers, and two hours before sunrise were safely perched on the opposite range, high enough to look down on the eagles. There, seated on a rock pinnacle, amid brushwood, one man slept while the other watched.

Long before nightfall they were again in motion. It was not possible to thread their way through the volcanic gashes of the mountains by night, but while light lasted they skirted along their slopes day after day, killing game with arrows which Wolf-Voice carried because of their silence and economy.

Wolf-Voice had no family tree. It was enough that he arrived among the traders speaking Gros Ventre; but a man on a galloping horse could see that his father was no Gros Ventre. He blew into the Crow camp on some friendly wind, prepared to make his thoughts known in his mother tongue or to embellish it with Breed-French or Chinook; he had sought the camp of the white soldiers and added to his Absaroke sundry curses and other useful expressions needed in his business.

He was a slim fellow with a massive head and a restless soul; a seeker after violence, with wicked little black eyes which glittered through two narrow slits and danced like drops of mercury. His dress was buckskin, cut in the red fashion; his black hat had succumbed to time and moisture, while a huge skinning-knife strapped across his stomach, together with a brass-mounted Henry rifle, indicated the danger zone one would pass before reaching his hair.

ONE day, as they broiled their evening meat on a tiny fire of dry sticks, Wolf-Voice said:

"We will be rich, brother, if the Sioux do not get a chance to dry our hair. The soldiers always make their scouts rich. There is plenty to eat in their wagons, and cartridges cost nothing. The soldiers always fight; they are like the gray bears—they do not know any better—and then is the time when we must watch close to get away before the Sioux have an advantage of them. They are fools and cannot run. They are tied to the ground. If you get a chance to carry the talking papers from one white chief to another, they pour the money into your blanket. I have never had a paper to carry, but I think they will give you one. If they do, brother, we will take the silver and get one of the white soldiers to buy us a bottle of whisky from the sutler."

A bottle of whisky and ten thousand dead men—quite a difference, thought

Ermine. "That is it—that is it," continued the musing white man to himself. "He goes to war for a bottle of whisky, and I go for ten thousand men."

Leaving the mountains again, they stalked over the moon-bathed land more like ghosts than men, and by day they lay so low that the crawling ants were their companions. By the Elk River as the Indians called the Yellowstone, Wolf-Voice pointed to a long, light streak which passed through the sage-brush.

"Brother, that is the sign of the white men. The buffalo, when they pass once, do not make a deeper path than that, and, brother, what is that in the road which shows so bright?"

Appropriating the gleaming thing, the Indian reached from his pony and picked it up, holding it close to his eyes for a moment before passing it to his companion. "What is that, brother?'

Ermine examined it closely, turning it in the moonlight. "I do not know. It is a paper. I will keep it until daylight."

A few steps ahead was found another glistening article. It was a canteen, lost on the march, by a pony soldier.

"We must not stay here," Wolf-Voice said. "The trail is old, but the Sioux will be near the soldiers. They are between us and the white men. You may be sure of that, brother."

They stopped for the day at the head of a rocky coulee, eating dried meat for fear of making a smoke. Ermine drew the paper from his pocket, laid it on the ground before him, and regarded it. It was a picture, that was plain. It was a photograph such as he had heard Crooked-Bear tell about—an image from the sun. He had never seen one before. Wolf-Voice also bent his beady eyes on the black and white thing, but it suggested nothing to him. "Humph!" he grunted, and lighted his pipe.

But before the persistent gaze of Ermine the face of a young woman began to unravel itself from a wonderful head-gear and an unknown frock. The eyes looked into his with a long, steady, and hypnotic gaze. The gentle face of the image fascinated the lad. It stirred his imagination and added "a beautiful white woman" to his "ten-thousand-dead-men" quest. Wolf-Voice had to call him twice to take his watch saying as he lay down, "Put the paper away, brother. It takes your eyes from the Sioux."

One day as they lay in a washout, Wolf-Voice pointed to columns of dust far to the south. Was it buffalo, Indians, or soldiers? The dust stayed all in one place. It might be a buffalo-surround or big herds about camps. This they were not able to determine.

"We will go to the dust this sleep and we will ride the war-horses," said Ermine. "The others which we have been riding are stiff and sore; we will leave them here and come after them if we can." As he spoke Ermine was braiding the tail of his favorite pony. When Wolf-Voice's attention was directed elsewhere, he took his medicine, the dried hoof of the white stallion, and rubbed it gently on his pony's heels. The prophet would not approve of this, he felt, but it could do no harm, since he also prayed God to make his pony run fast and not stumble, to blind the Sioux, stop their ears, and otherwise to cherish appropriately the poor life of John Ermine who believed in Him and now wanted His help.

Late at night as they made their way down a long ridge, they heard a horse whinny in one of the breaks of the land. Without a word they turned away from the noise.

"Indians," Wolf-Voice whispered. "The white men never let their horses loose in the night. That pony was alone, or we should have heard more sounds. He was calling his brothers. Now we must blind our trail. Their scouts will find it in the morning."

ACCORDINGLY they allowed their horses to feed slowly along, not attempting to guide them, and after a mile felt that any one who should follow those tracks would think that they were loose horses grazing. By the light of the late moon they made their way more quickly, but always stopping to separate the sounds of the night—the good sounds from the bad. They could see that they were coming to the river, and as they rose on a wave of the land, they saw a few faint sparks glitter far down the valley.

"It is the big fires of the white

soldiers, brother. We will go in when the sun comes up. If we should go near them now, they would fire at us. The white men shoot at anything which moves in the dark. A wolf is not safe near their camps when the sun has gone."

Before the gray of morning they were safely ensconced under a bluff, waiting for the daylight and within a mile of the long line of Sibley tents. They heard the hungry mule chorus, the clank of chains, the monotonous calls of the sentries and the camp slowly developed before their eyes like a photographic negative. John Ermine began to understand ten thousand men.

Softly the metallic reveille drifted to their ears. It spread from one group of tents to another until the whole air danced with the delightful sound. The watchers on the hillside were preoccupied with the movements of the soldiers. They listened to the trumpets and saw the men answer them by forming long lines. In a moment the lines broke into hurrying individuals, the fires began to send up the quiet morning smoke, while the mule chorus ceased.

As though shot out of the ground by some hidden force, Wolf-Voice bounded up. "Get up!" he yelled, and Ermine bounded on to his horse. One look behind told the story. The Sioux were coming. He saw the lightning play of the ponies' legs, heard the whips crack on their quarters, and was away like a flash, bearing hard on the soldier camp. Before many bounds he recovered from his surprise. It was not far, and his horse was answering the medicine. He had never run like this before. The Sioux had found and followed their trail and had nearly caught them napping. After their long journey they had almost been cut off during the last mile of it. Seeing that their prey had escaped, the Sioux swerved like hawks, pulling up on the hill.

Turning, Wolf-Voice and Ermine shouted back taunts at them, fired their guns at the group, and then leisurely loped toward the camps. While yet quite a way out, three white soldiers rose suddenly from a dry wash with their rifles: "Halt! Who's there?"

Wolf-Voice raised his hand in the peace sign, and said: "We are your fren's, we aire two Crow Enjun; don' shoot!" and continued to advance.

The soldiers stood with their guns in readiness. "Get off those ponies," one called. "Lay your guns on the ground. I guess you are all right." And then, looking at Ermine with a laugh: "Is that blond there a Crow? Guess them Sioux scared him white. I've often heard tell of a man's hair turning white in a single night."

The faintest suggestion of a smile stole over John Ermine as he comprehended.

"No, soldiers, we are not afraid. Why can't you let two men go into the big camp. Are all those soldiers afraid of two men?" And the pickets laughed at the quaint conjecture. Shortly an officer rode up on a horse and questioned Ermine.

"Who are you?"

"We are friends of the white people. Did you see that we are not friends of the Sioux?"

"Yes; I saw those Indians chase you. Were they Sioux?"

"We took that for granted." And again the corner of John Ermine's mouth relaxed.

"Yes, of course," was the reply. "I admire your judgment. Come with me." The officer turned to ride back. The three ambled along together. "Who are you?" the officer repeated.

"I am a white man, and my comrade is an Indian."

"What is your name?"

"My name is John Ermine, and I want to be a scout. Will you take me?"

"That is not my business but I have no doubt the proper authority will be glad to put you on the pay-roll. You don't seem any more popular with the Sioux than we are."

V

KICKING up dust clouds, the three horsemen jogged into camp. The officer stopped in front of a tent around which many men were standing or coming and going. He spoke to one who wore a big hat and a split beard.

"General Crook," he said, "these two men were just chased into camp by

Indians. They say they are Crows, or at least from the Crows, and they want to be made scouts."

"Where did you come from, my boy?" the general asked John Ermine.

"I came from the Stinking Water country to help you fight the Sioux—myself and Wolf-Voice there," replied Ermine.

Turning to that waif, the general said, "Who are you?"

Patting his chest impressively, Wolf-Voice spoke: "Me? My mother she was Gros Ventre. I am a warrior. I spak de English. I was scout with Yellow Hair—what you call General Custer. I am brav mans."

"*Umph*—no doubt," grunted the Gray Fox. "You were not with him when he died? I suppose you attended to that matter with proper thoroughness. Have you seen any Sioux signs?"

"Yaas—day follar de wagon, dey aire leave dar pony-track all roun you."

The Gray Fox fastened quizzical eyes on the white lad.

"Do you talk Crow?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Can you make the hand talk?"

Ermine gave the sign for "Yes."

"Have you ever been to school?"

"No, sir."

"Who taught you to speak English?"

"My old comrade, Crooked-Bear," said Ermine.

"Crooked-Bear — Crooked - B e a r , " mused the general. "Oh, I give it up," as he turned away. "You are not one of the Pike County breed, it seems—Crooked-Bear—Crooked-Bear. T a k e them to the scout camp, Ferguson." And the general retired to his tent.

The trio went on toward the scout camp, and as they passed a man on foot he inquired of Ferguson, "Where did you get that pair of aces?"

"The Sioux dealt them to me this morning. Will they fill your hand?"

"Yes, sir—think they will." Then to John Ermine, "Do you savvy this country, pardner?"

"I have always lived in this country, sir," Ermine replied, with a wave of his arm around the horizon which had the true Indian swing to it, an accomplishment only acquired by white men after long years of association with the tribes. The old chief of scouts recognized the significance of the motion on the instant, and knew that one who could make it very probably possessed the other qualifications for his corps.

"What is your name?"

"John Ermine, sir," came the answer.

"All right. Will you turn these men over to me for duty, Lieutenant Ferguson?"

"I will," replied Ferguson. "Go with Captain Lewis there. And good luck to you, Mr. Ermine."

After answering certain questions by the chief of scouts, which were intended to prove their fitness for the job, the two late fugitives had the pleasure of knowing that Uncle Sam would open his wagons to them in return for their hair and blood when his representative should order the sacrifice. Having done with these formalities, under the trained guidance of Wolf-Voice the two men speedily found their way to the scouts' mess, where they took a hearty toll of the government. Later, John Ermine walked aimlessly around camp, all eyes and ears. No backwoods boy at a country fair ever had his faculties so over-fed and clogged as he. In turn the soldiers attempted to engage him in conversation as he passed about among them, but the hills had put a seal of silence on his lips. He had not yet found himself amid the bustle.

Remarks grated harshly on his ears and the unkindness of them undermined the admiration for the white soldiers which the gentle treatment of the officers had instilled.

"Say, Bill, come look at the sorrel Injun," sang one trooper to another who stood leaning on a wagon-wheel whittling a stick, to which that one replied: "You take my advice and let the sorrel Injun alone. That butcher knife in his belt is no ornament."

BY NOON Ermine's mind had been so sloshed and hail-stoned with new ideas that his head was tired. They were coming so fast that he could not stow them, so he found his way back to the scout camp and lay down on a stray robe. After a few hours' sleep, he was wakened by a touch on the shoulder.

"Captain Lewis wants to see you," a

soldier told him. "Come on."

He followed to the tent designated, and was told to come in and sit down. "Your name is John Ermine and you are a white man," Lewis said. "Where were you born?"

"I do not know, Captain. But I have lived all my life with the Crows."

"Yes. But they did not teach you to speak English."

"No. I have lived some years with my old comrade up in the mountains, and he taught me."

"Who was your old comrade, as you call him?"

"Captain, I cannot tell, any more than to say that he is an educated white man, who said he is dead, that his fires have burnt out. He told me I ought to come here and help fight the Sioux."

"Have you ever been to war?"

"Yes. I took a scalp from a Sioux warrior when I was a boy, and I wear the eagle feather upright."

"Ho, ho! that is good. I see that you carry a Spencer carbine. I have not seen one lately. We do not use them now." The Captain scribbled a requisition, then bawled: "Jones! *Oh* Jones, Jones!" Almost instantly a soldier stepped into the tent, saluting. "Go down and draw a carbine, fifty rounds, a saddle, blanket, and bridle." Jones disappeared. "Oh, Jones, and a shirt and hat." Then turning to Ermine, "And now, my boy, may I give you a little advice?"

"You may, sir; I know I have much to learn," assented John Ermine.

"Well, then, you are an odd-looking person even in this camp, and that is saying much, I can assure you. I will have a hat here in a moment, so may I ask if you will not take your hair out of those braids? It will not interfere with your usefulness."

"Yes, sir, I will," quietly said the young man, and forthwith undid the plats. Having finished, he gave his head a toss. The golden tresses, released from their binding, draped his face, falling down in heavy masses over his shoulders, and the Captain said slowly, "Well, I will be good gol-darned!"

The orderly entered at this point, loaded down with quartermaster and ordnance stuff. On seeing Ermine, he whistled like a bull elk. Then discipline told, and he recovered himself. "I have the stuff, sir—but—but I'm afraid, sir, the hat won't fit."

"All right, all right, Jones. It will do."

Jones took himself out into the darkness. Ermine was put in possession of the much-coveted saddle and a new gun, one with a blue barrel without a rust-spot on it anywhere, inside or out. His feelings were only held in leash by a violent repression. The officers enjoyed the proceedings hugely as the young man slipped into the new shirt and tied the yellow handkerchief round his neck. The campaign hat was a failure, as Jones had feared. It floated idly on the fluffy golden tide, and was clearly going to spoil the Captain's art work. It was nothing short of comical. Frantically the officer snatched his own hat from his camp-chest, one of the broad rolling sombreros common on the plains in those days, but now seen no more. This he clapped on Ermine's head, gave it a downward tug together with a pronounced list to the nigh side. Then, standing back, he ran his eyes critically over his work.

"Well, my boy," said the officer, "go down to camp now. The outfit moves tomorrow. You'll do in a free-for-all, by George."

VI

PASSING days that followed saw the big serpents of men crawl on and on —over the rolling land, saw them splash through the rivers, wind round the hills, and lie comfortably down at night. About them fluttered the Indian scouts like flies around a lamp—hostiles and allies —marking down each other's sign, dashing in and out, exchanging shots, but always keeping away from the coils of the serpents.

Many men besides Captain Lewis held out their hands to Ermine, attracted as they were, first by his picturesque appearance, fine pony, and seat, and Lewis' enthusiasm but later by his low-voiced simplicity and acute knowledge concerning the matters about them. Old Major Ben Searles in particular used to center benevolent eyes on Ermine. He had a boy back in the States and, had he

gone to some other school than West Point, might have been a superintendent of an orphan asylum as easily as the soldier which he was. Ermine's quaint questions gave him delicious little mental jolts.

"Why is it, Uncle Ben," asked Ermine, "that all these men come out here to march, get killed, freeze, and starve? They don't have any wives, and I can't see what they have to protect except their eatables."

"You see, kid, they enlist to do what the government wants them to do, and the government wants them to make the Sioux stop killing white folks just now."

"Yes, but they won't do it. Why don't the government mount them on buffalo ponies, make them eat dried meat, and run after the Sioux instead of taking the villages to war?"

"Well, Ermine, I don't know why. I suppose that is what the Indians would like them to do, and I reckon that is the reason the soldiers don't do it. Soldiers calculate not to do what the enemy wants them to do. Don't you get discouraged. Wait a year or two or three, my boy. Oh, we'll get there. We don't know how, but we always stand pat!"

"What do you mean by standing pat? Never heard those words."

Old Searles laughed. " 'Pat' is a word we use in a game of cards, and it means that when you think you are licked you guess you are not. It's a great word, Ermine."

The huge column having crawled over the country as far as it was ordered, broke into divisions, some going down the river in steamboats and other parts through the hills to their far-off posts and cantonments. But two infantry regiments stayed behind as a reminder to the Sioux that the game was not played out. To one of these Captain Lewis was attached, which good fortune gave Ermine continued employment.

The soldiers began to build winter cantonments at the mouth of the Buffalo Tongue River, and to gather great quantities of stores which were hauled from Fort Benton. Here was something that the Sioux could attack. They jumped the trains savagely, burned the grass, cut in on the animals to stampede, and peppered up the men as they slept. Stores the troops must have and, though they met repulse at times, they "pounded" the trains through to the Tongue.

It was the custom for wagon trains to go into camp early in the afternoon, which gave the stock a chance to graze while it was yet daylight. It also made it possible to guard them from sudden forays by Indians.

On one of these occasions Ermine was with a train which made one of the halts as usual. The Indians had not interfered, and to kill time a few officers, among whom was Searles, started a game of poker. Ermine looked on over their shoulders, trying to comprehend. He had often played the Indian game of "hand," so that poker was merely a new slide between wealth and poverty. Seeing him, Captain Lewis sent him on some trivial errand.

While he was gone, an agreement was made to have him come in, and then they were to "skin him alive" just to see how he would stand it. It worked out beautifully. First they separated what little money he had from his clothes. Then the sombrero, which was stacked up as five dollars, found its way to Captain Lewis' head in place of a very bad campaign hat. Next came off the buckskin coat, which was followed by the revolver, and slowly, so that his suspicions might not be aroused, all his personal property, including the saddle and gun, which properly did not belong to him, was laid on the grass beside the victors.

"This is going to be a cold winter, John," laughed one, "or else we'd let you in on that shirt."

"Want to put that pony up for a hundred, Ermine?" asked another.

"No. I'll keep the pony; he's medicine. I've often lost all I had with the plum stones. I guess I don't understand poker." And the young scout arose smiling.

THE trio of gamblers, who wore their spoils on their own persons, to the huge edification of the camp, arranged to prolong the torture until they should see the young hatless, coatless, unarmed scout on his barebacked pony during the next march. At the following camp they

were to play again, lose to him, and end the joke.

One of the officers of the poker engagement rode a well-bred American horse of which he was very proud. He had raced it successfully and never declined an opportunity, of which fact Ermine was aware.

It had slowly come to his mind that he had been foully dealt with, so about midnight he jumped up—he had a plan. With the cooperation of a quartermaster sergeant whom he took into his confidence, he watered the American horse, fed him with a heavy feed of very salty corn, and later watered him again. The horse had been on short rations and was a glutton. It was with the greatest difficulty that the noble animal managed his breakfast at all but he was always willing at each opportunity to weaken the saline solution in his stomach.

When the train pulled out, there was Ermine, bare-backed and ridiculous. He rode through the volley of jeers and approached the horse-racing officer.

"If you are a good gambler, sir," he said, "I will run my horse against yours, three arrow-flights and a pitch, horse against horse."

The officer halted and stroked his chin. "Hum—hum—yes. By gum, if my horse can't take that runt of yours into camp, he isn't good enough for me. I'll go you."

A cheer went up from those assembled. Distance was paced off on the level plain. The judges were set. The scouts and officers lined up.

The American's horse's eyes fairly bulged with excitement. He broke into a dripping perspiration, but seemingly no one noticed this but Ermine. He knew that the load of water would choke him in twenty yards. The pistol spoke and Ermine's pony gained three jumps from the mark. The American made the best of a bad job, but Ermine was able to turn at the finish and back him over the judges' line.

The officer nearly had apoplexy, as he pulled up. He threw himself off the horse and handed the reins to Ermine.

"If you will get all my clothes, saddle, and gun back from your comrades, I will give you your horse," said the scout.

The spectators who knew about the poker game sat howling hopelessly on their horses' backs. Searles and the others now came to their beaten friend's aid. They shed their plunder in front of Ermine's horse, produced the saddle and gun from a near-by escort wagon, laid them carefully down with the rest, and the victor granted peace.

"Here is your horse," said Ermine, and he laughed.

Searles stood in front of the scout and made utterance: "I want to say before all these men that the poker game was not on the square—that we robbed you purposely for a joke, and that we intended to give your property back to you tonight. I call on all these men to witness my remarks."

"Yes, yes," came the chorus; "it was all a joke. Searles said he would give it back. Don't hold it out against him, Ermine."

By this time John Ermine had his clothing and saddle arranged and was mounted. He spoke:

"Well, if it only was a joke, I suppose I ought to say that I sat up half of last night salting your horse. Look at him! He is as full of water as a drowned buffalo. I am glad it did not kill him. Let us bury the ax."

Major Searles and his fellows were unlike many jokers. They laughed with the others.

* * * * *

The march was resumed with John Ermine and Wolf-Voice, as usual well out in front of the train, loping this way and that about the course of advance, with eyes for everything. Presently they were seen to stop, turn, and come back, flying as fast and straight as the antelope runs.

"What's up, Ermine?" demanded Searles.

"Major, the ground out there is alive with fresh pony-tracks. I think you had better bunch up."

The train was strung out, having passed a bad "draw." Turning, the major shouted: "Close up in columns of fours! Deploy that escort out!"

The order flew down the train. The whips cracked, and the straining mules trotted into position. The infantry guard ran out from the sides, shoving

cartridges into the breech-blocks. Even while this was in motion, a torrent of Sioux poured over the bluffs, back of the flat, and came on. The soldiers dropped on to their knees in the sage-brush. The major spurred to the particular point for which they were headed, followed by scouts and several mounted men.

"Steady, men! Hold your fire!"

THE men were aiming, and each had five cartridges in his teeth. In a sonorous roll came, "Steady—steady—steady!" And the gay stream of savagery bore on.

"Fire!" Like a double drag on a drum which gradually dies, the rifles rattled down the extended line, all concentrated on the head of the flying column. The smoke played along the gray sage. There was a sharp clatter of breech-blocks, and an interval.

"Ready! Fire!" and this repeated.

The Major jogged to a wind-blown place and saw that the column had veered to its right but was not checked. Followed by his few mounted men, he rode along behind their line parallel with the head of the charge, but before the slow and steady fire the Indian line drew out. The train was caught in the circle, but the enemy had not the heart to ride over the deadly skirmish line. The close columns of wagons now turned off down toward the river, and, keeping their distance, the infantry followed it. Indian ponies lay kicking out on the dry plain, and here and there could be seen warriors who retired slowly from the racing Indians. They had been plugged.

The Indians made a stand under the cut banks of the river, but were flanked out. The train drove slowly into a corral form, when the mules were unhooked. The guard began to rifle-pit among the wagons, and the Indians drew off to breathe their ponies.

Major Searles mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. "So far, so good! But not so very far either!"

Towing his pony behind him, Wolf-Voice came up. Calling loudly, he said:

"Maje Searl, bout two-tree minit you bettar look out. Dose Kul-tustil-akum she mak de grass burn yu up, by Gar. Win' she waas come deese way."

"Yes—yes, that's right. Here you, Ermine, and you, Lieutenant Smith, take what men you want and kill a wounded mule—drag his hide over the grass to windward. It is short and won't burn high. And, Lieutenant, give me all the men you can over here. They will try to come through the smoke." Saying which, the Major made his way to the ammunition wagons and had the mules hooked to them, intending to run these into the river in case the fire came through.

These preparations had no sooner been made than, true to Wolf-Voice's admonitions, the Indians came down, and, just out of rifle-range, started the fire down wind. The dripping carcass of the mule was dragged in a ring round the windward side of the train. Smoke eddied over the wagons. The Indians could not be seen. Every man's eyes and ears were strained and fingers twitched as they lay at an "aim" or "ready," among the wagon-wheels.

To the silent soldiers this was one of the times when a man lives four years in twenty minutes. As the fire came nearer, they heard its gentle crackle, crackle. Their nerves all crackled in unison. It reached the bloody ring left by the poor mule. "Would the screeching Injuns never come?" At the guard line the flames died and crackled no more. The smoke grew thinner, and at last they saw out through it. The Indians held themselves safely out of rifle-shot.

"Hum," said Searles, as he stepped down from a wagon-wheel, "they didn't want any of this chicken pie." And then he did what he was never known to do under ordinary circumstances. When he was through, the men cheered, and every mule-skinner who had heard him envied a man who could talk it off just like that.

"Ah, Maje Searl," chimed in Wolf-Voice, "don' you been scare. Dose Injuns no say goo'by yet, mabeso."

And they did not say good-by. They dismounted and went behind the washes in the shallow river. They peppered and banged the men as they watered the stock, the perilous trip only being made behind a strong skirmish line with three

men hit and a half-dozen mules. The soldiers ate a quiet supper and put out the fires before the sun went down. The Indians, with the declining light, crawled in on the train and pecked at the monster.

SEARLES sent for Ermine and Wolf-Voice. "We are corralled," he said, "and I haven't escort enough to move. I can hold out till snow, but can't graze my stock. Some one has to go back for reënforcements. Will you go? It can be made on a good horse by morning."

"I'll try it, Major," Ermine said. "I can go if I can get through with a fair start."

"Will you go also, Mr. Wolf-Voice?"

"Hit be good chance for geet keel. Yaes, I go, mebeso, feefty doaller."

"What do you want for going, John Ermine?" asked the Major.

"I don't want anything. I came to fight the Sioux. I do not go to war for fifty dollars." But it was too dark for the half-breed to see the contempt in Ermine's face, so he only shrugged his shoulders and contented himself with, "Oh, well, mabeso does soldier-man go for not so much. I do not."

"All right, all right! I'll give you an order for fifty dollars. Here are the papers." And the Major handed one to each. "Now, don't lose them, whatever else you do."

"Ma pony, she steef, no good. I was go on de foot." And Wolf-Voice proceeded to skin off his motley garments. Ermine half stripped himself, also, and his horse wholly, bound up the tail, and in the gloom rubbed the old dried horse's hoof on his heels. It had, at least, never done any harm, and at times favored him. Sak-a-war-te and the God of the white men—he did not know whether they were one or two. Trusting his valuables to the care of the Major, he was let out of the corral after a good rattle of firing, into the darkness, away from the river.

The slow fight continued during the night and all the next day, but by evening the Indians disappeared. They had observed the approach of reënforcements, which came in during the following morning, led by Ermine. Wolf-Voice, who had been on foot, did not make the rapid time of his mounted partner, but had gone through and acquired the fifty dollars, which was the main object.

VII

ICE and snow had gone. The plains and boxlike bluff around the cantonments had turned to a rich velvet of green. The soldiers' nerves tingled as they gathered round the landing. They cheered and laughed and joked, slapped and patted hysterically, and forgot bilious officialism entirely.

Far down the river could be seen the black funnel of smoke from the steamboat—their only connection with the world of the white men. In due course the floating house—for she looked more like one than a boat—pushed her way to the landing, safe from her thousand miles of snags and sandbars. A cannon thudded and boomed. The soldiers cheered, and the people on the boat waved handkerchiefs; officers who saw their beloved ones walked to and fro in caged impatience. When the gangplanks were run out, they swarmed aboard like Malay pirates.

John Ermine, with Wolf-Voice at his side, missed no details of the scene. Ermine leaned on a wagon-tail, carefully paring a thin stick with a jackknife. He was arrayed for a gala day in new soldier trousers, a yellow buckskin shirt beautifully beaded by the Indian method, a spotted white handkerchief around his neck, buckskin leggings on the lower leg above gay moccasins, a huge skinning-knife and revolver in his belt, and a silver watch chain. His golden hair was freshly combed, and his big rakish sombrero had an eagle feather fastened to the crown, dropping idly to one side, where the soft wind eddied it about.

As the people gathered their bags and parcels, they came ashore in small groups. Major Searles passed on with the rest, his arms full of woman's equipment, Mrs. Searles on one side and his daughter on the other.

"Hello, Ermine."

"How do, Major?" spoke the scout as he cast his whittling from him.

"This is John Ermine, who saved my

life last winter, my dear. This is Mrs. Searles, John."

She bowed, but the scout shook hands with her. Miss Searles, upon presentation, gave Ermine a most chilling bow, if raising the chin and dropping the eyelids can be so described. After which they passed on.

"My, my, Papa, did you ever see such beautiful hair as that man Ermine has?" said Katherine Searles.

"Yes, good crop that—'nough to stuff a mattress with," replied the Major.

"If the young man lost his hat, it would not be a calamity," observed the wife.

"And, Papa, who was that dreadful Indian in the red blanket?"

"Oh, an old scoundrel named Wolf-Voice, but useful in his place. You must never feed him, Sarah, or he will descend on us like the plague of locusts. If he ever gets his teeth into one of our biscuits, I'll have to call out the squad to separate him from our mess-chest."

Ermine, meanwhile, stood motionless, watching the girl until she was out of sight. Then he walked away from the turmoil, up along the river-bank; and here, having gained a sufficient distance, he undid the front of his shirt and took out a buckskin bag, which hung from his neck. It contained his dried horse's hoof and the photograph of a girl, the one he had picked up near Fort Ellis. He gazed at it and said softly, "They are the same, that girl and this shadow. It must have been Sak-a-war-te who guided me in the moonlight to that little shadow paper there in the road. It means something—it must."

Ermine walked back toward his quarters. Captain Lewis came by with a tall young man in citizen's clothes.

"I say, and who is that stunning chap?" said this one to Lewis.

"One of my men. Oh, come here Ermine. This is Mr. Sterling Harding, an Englishman come out to see this country and hunt. You may be able to tell him some things he wants to know."

The two young men shook hands. Which had the stranger thoughts concerning the other cannot be stated, but they both felt the desire for better acquaintance. Good relations were established in a glance.

"Oh, I suppose, Mr. Ermine, you have shot in this country."

"Yes." Ermine smiled. "I have shot most every kind of thing we have in this country except a woman."

"Oh! ha! ha ha!' Harding produced a cigar-case. "A woman? I suppose there hasn't been any to shoot until this boat came. Do you intend to try your hand on one? Will you have a cigar?"

"No, sir. I only meant to say I had shot things. I suppose you mean have I hunted."

"Yes, yes—exactly."

"Well then, Mr. Sterling Harding, I have never done anything else."

"Mr. Harding, I will leave you with Ermine," interjected Captain Lewis. "I have some details to look after. Sterling, you will come to our mess for luncheon at noon?"

"Yes, with pleasure, Captain."

AS the chief of scouts took himself off, Harding turned back to Ermine. "I suppose, Mr. Ermine, that the war is quite over, and that one may feel free to go about here without being potted by the aborigines?"

"The what? Never heard of them. I can go where I like without being killed, but I have to keep my eyes skinned."

"Would you be willing to take me out?"

"I guess Wolf-Voice and I could take you hunting easily enough if the Captain will let us." Ermine thought for a time. "Would you mind staying out all one moon, Mr. Harding?" he asked.

"One moon? You mean thirty days. Yes, three moons, if necessary. Where would you go?"

"Back in the mountains—back on the Stinking Water. It is where I come from, and I haven't been home in nearly a year. I should like to see my people."

"Then we will go to the Stinking Water, which I hope belies its name. When shall we start?"

"Ten suns from now I will go if I can."

"Very well. We will purchase ponies and other necessaries meanwhile. How many ponies shall we require?"

"Two apiece—one to ride and the other to pack," came the answer to the question.

Harding protested. "But, Mr. Ermine, how should I transport my heads back to this point with only one pack-animal?"

"Heads? What heads?"

"The heads of the game I expect to kill."

Ermine stared at him in surprise. "What do you want of their heads? We never take the heads. We give them to our little friends, the coyotes."

"Yes, yes, but I must have the heads to take back to England with me. I am afraid, Mr. Ermine, we shall have to be more liberal with our pack-train. However, we can go into the matter at greater length later."

Sterling Harding wanted to refer to the Captain for further understanding of his new guide. So to Lewis went Harding.

"I say, Captain, your Ermine there is an artless fellow. He is proposing to take me out for a whole moon, as he calls it, with only one pack-pony. He fails, I think, to comprehend that I want to bring back the heads of my game."

"Ha! I will make that plain to him."

Seeing Ermine some little distance away, the Captain sent an orderly after him.

"Ermine, I think you had better take one or two white packers and at least eight or ten animals with you when you go with Mr. Harding."

"All right, sir, we can take as many packers as he likes, but no wagons."

On the following morning Harding hunted up John Ermine. "Shall we go down to the Indian camp and try to buy some ponies?" he asked.

"No, I don't go near the Sioux. I am a kind of Crow," Ermine said. "I have fought with them. They forgive the soldiers, but their hearts are bad when they look at me. I'll get Ramon to go with you when you buy the horses. Ramon was a small trader before the war, used to going about with a half-dozen pack-horses, but the Sioux ran him off the range. He has pack saddles and rawhide bags, which you can hire if you want to."

"All right—take me to Ramon."

Having seen that worthy depart on his trading mission with Harding in tow, Ermine felt relieved. Impulse drew him to the officers' row, where he strolled about with his hands in his cartridge-belt until he found himself suddenly accosted. By his side was the original of his cherished photograph, accompanied by Lieutenant Butler of the cavalry, a tall young man whose body and movements had been made to conform to the West Point standards.

"Miss Searles wants to visit the scout camp. Would you kindly take us down?"

John Ermine's soul drifted out through the top of his head in unseen vapors, but he managed to say that he would. He fell in beside the young woman, and they walked on together. To be so near the reality, the literal flesh and blood of what had been a long series of efflorescent dreams, quite stirred him. His earthly senses fled. He tripped and stumbled, fell down, and crawled over answers to her questions, and he wished Lieutenant Butler was farther away than a pony could run in a week.

"Mr. Ermine, please carry my parasol."

THE object in question was newer to him than a man-of-war would have been. He did not exactly make out whether the thing was to keep the sun off, or to hide her face from his when she wanted to. He wrapped his fingers around the handle with a drowning clutch, and it seemed to burn his hand. If previously it had taken all his attention to manage himself, he felt now that he would bog down under this new weight. Atlas holding the world had a flying start of Ermine.

He raised it above her head. She looked up at him so pleasantly, that he felt she realized his predicament. "Miss Searles," he said, "if I lug this baby tent into that scout camp, they will either shoot at us, or crawl the ponies and scatter out for miles. I think they would stand if you or the Lieutenant pack it. But if I do this, there won't be anything to see but ponies' tails wavering over the prairie."

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Ermine. I'll come to your rescue." And she did. She smiled. "I guess this parasol seems ridiculous to you, but it keeps the hot sun off my face. I freckle terribly." She gave him a lingering look and then be-

gan to laugh. "I wish I were an Indian —I'd scalp you. You have such wonderful hair."

Ermine grinned back at her. "Oh, you don't have to be an Indian to do that. I'll hand you my scalping knife. Go ahead any time you want. Just give the word." Lieutenant Butler looked at Ermine—amused, saying nothing.

Katherine Searles' laughter deepened. She cast a quick glance at Lieutenant Butler, then turned back to Ermine. "What would you do if I decided to eat you?"

John Ermine's answer came promptly: "I'd build a fire and put on the kettle." He spoke in jest but there was an undertone of seriousness that disturbed Katherine. She sought for a diversion.

"Oh, here are the Indians," she said, then halted. Lodges loomed up before them. There were copper skinned men and women there, fringed and beaded, clad in bright colored garments. "My, they look savage." Her alarm was not all pretended. She cast a quick glance at Lieutenant Butler. "Perhaps we shouldn't have come."

"Why are you fraid, Miss Searles?" asked Ermine.

"Their faces are so dark. They look at me so strangely." She shivered.

One of the Indians approached the party. Ermine spoke to him in a loud, guttural, carrying voice, so different from his quiet use of English, that Miss Searles fairly jumped.

"Go back, brother—the white squaw is afraid of you! Go back, I say!"

The intruder hesitated. Again Ermine spoke! "Go back, you brown son of mules. This squaw is my friend. I tell you she is afraid of you. I am not. Go back, and before the sun is so high I will come to you. Make this boy go back, Broken-Shoe. He is a fool."

RELUCTANTLY the old chieftain emitted a few hollow grunts, with a click between, and the young Indian turned away.

The girl said quickly, "Have I offended the Indian? He looks daggers at you. Let's get away from here quick!" Then in the safety of distance she lightly put her hand on his arm. "What was it all about, Mr. Ermine? Tell me."

Ermine's brain was not working on schedule time, but he fully realized what the affront to the Indian meant in the near future. He knew he would have to make his words good; but when the creature of his dreams was involved, he would have measured arms with a grizzly bear.

"He would not go back," said the scout, simply.

"But for what was he coming?" she asked.

"For you," was the reply.

"Why?" asked the girl. "Did he want to kill me?"

"No, he wanted to shake hands with you. He is a fool."

"Oh, only to shake hands with me? And why didn't you let him? That's harmless."

"Because he is a fool," the scout ventured, and then in tones which carried the meaning, "Shake hands with you!"

"I understand now—you were protecting me. But he must hate you. I believe he'll, harm you; Indians are relentless, I have heard." She turned to the lieutenant. "Why did we ever go near the creatures?" she said. "I have seen all I care to of them. Let's go home, Mr. Butler."

The two—the young lady and the young man—bowed to Ermine, who touched the brim of his sombrero, after the fashion of the soldiers. They departed up the road, leaving Ermine to go, he knew not where, and in due course they reached the cabin of the Searles, where they told the story of the incident.

The Major wanted more details concerning Ermine. "Just what did he say, Butler?"

"I do not know," Butler answered. "He spoke in some Indian language."

"Was he angry, and was the Indian who approached you mad?"

"They were like two dogs who stand ready to fight," replied Butler.

"Oh, some Indian row, no one knows what, and Ermine won't tell," Major Searles said. "Yet as a rule these people are peaceful among themselves. I'll ask him about it."

"Why can't you have Mr. Ermine removed from that scout camp, Papa?"

Katherine suggested. "Why can't he be brought up to some place near here? I don't see why such a decent white person as he is should associate with those savages."

"Don't worry about Ermine, daughter. You wouldn't have him rank the Colonel out of quarters, would you? I'll look into this matter a little."

Meanwhile the young scout walked rapidly toward his camp. Going straight to his tent, he picked up his rifle, loaded it, and buckled on the belt containing ammunition for it. He twisted his six-shooter round in front of him, and worked his knife up and down in its sheath. Then he strode out, going slowly down to the scout fire.

Ermine came over and walked into the circle, stopping in front of the fire, thus facing the young Indian to whom he had used the harsh words. There was no sound except the rumble of a far-off government mule team. He deliberately rolled a cigarette. Having done this to his satisfaction, he stooped down holding it against the coals, and it was ages before it caught fire. Then he put it to his lips, blew a cloud of smoke in the direction of his foe, and spoke in Absaroke:

"Well, I am here."

The silence continued. The Indian looked at him with a dull steady stare, but did nothing. Finally Ermine withdrew. He understood; the Indian did not consider the time or opportunity propitious, but the scout did not flatter himself that such a time or place would never come. That was the one characteristic of an Indian of which a man could be certain.

VIII

LIEUTENANT SHOCKLEY poked his head in the half-open door.

"Going to follow the dogs today, Lewis?" he asked.

"Yes, reckon I'll give this chair a vacation; wait a minute." The captain mauled the contents of his ditty-box and dug up a snaffle-bit. "I find my horse goes against this better than the government thing, when the idea is to get there and never mind formations."

"Well, shake yourself, Lewis. The people are pulling out."

"Ahead of the scouts?" The chief of them laughed.

"Yes, and you know the line never retires on the scouts—so smoke up."

The orderly having changed the bits, the two mounted and walked away. "'Spose this is for the Englishman," Lewis said. "Great people these Englishmen—go trotting all over the earth to chase something; anything will do from rabbits to tigers."

"Must be a great deprivation to most Englishmen to have to live in England where there is nothing to chase. Look, there goes your friend Ermine on that war-pony of his. Well, he can show his tail to any horse in cantonments. By the way, some one was telling me that he carries a medicine-bag with him. Isn't he a Christian?"

They soon joined a group of mounted officers and ladies, orderlies, and nondescripts of the camp, all alive with anticipations, and their horses stepping high.

"Good morning, Mr. Harding," called out Captain Lewis. "How do you find yourself?"

"Fine—fine, thank you."

"How are you mounted?"

Harding patted his horse's neck, saying: "Quite well—a good beast—seems to manage my weight, but I find this saddle odd. Bless me, I know there is no habit in the world so strong as the saddle. I have the flat saddle habit."

"Oh, you'll get along; there isn't a fence nearer than St. Paul except the quartermaster's corral."

"I say, Searles," spoke Lewis, "there's the Colonel out in front—happy as a boy out of school—glad there's something to keep him quiet. We must do this for him every day, or he'll have us out pounding sage-brush."

"There is no champagne like the air of the high plains before the sun burns the bubble out of it," proclaimed Shockley, who was young. "And to see these beautiful women riding along . . . Say, Harding, if I get off this horse I'll set this prairie on fire." And Shockley urged his horse to the side of Miss Katherine Searles.

Observing the manoeuvre, Captain Lewis poked the Major in the ribs. "I

don't think your daughter wants a beau very much, Major. The youngsters are four files deep around her now."

" 'Tis youth, Bill Lewis. We've all had it once, and from what I observe, they handle it pretty much as we used to."

Lieutenant Shockley found himself unable to get nearer than two horses to Miss Searles, so he bawled: "And I thought you fellows were hunting wolves. I say, Miss Searles, if you ride one way and the wolf runs the other, it's easy to see which'll have the larger field. My money's on you—two to one. Who'll take the wolf?"

"Oh, Mr. Shockley, between you and this Western sun, I'll soon need a new freckle lotion."

Every one greeted Shockley derisively.

"Guide right!" shouted Shockley, putting his horse into a lope. Miss Searles playfully slashed about with her riding-whip, saying, "Deploy, gentlemen," and followed him. Most of the others broke apart. They had been beaten by the strategy of the loud mouth. Lieutenant Butler, however, pressed resolutely on.

"I think Butler has been hit over the heart," said one of the dispersed cavaliers.

"You bet, and it's a disabling wound too. I wonder if Miss Searles intends to cure him. When I see her handle her eyes, methinks, compadre, she's a cruel little puss. I wouldn't care to be her mouse."

THE girl and her two escorts rode on.

"I say, Miss Searles," Shockley said with a grin, "those fellows will set spring guns and bear traps for me tonight. They'll never forgive me."

"Oh, well, Mr. Shockley, to be serious, I don't care. Do you suppose a wolf will be found? I am so bored." Which remark caused the eminent Lieutenant to open his mouth very wide in imitation of a laugh, divested of all mirth.

"Miss Katherine Searles," he said, in mock majesty, "I shall do myself the honor to crawl into the first badger-hole we come to and stay there until you dig me out."

"Don't be absurd. You know I always bury my dead. Mr. Butler, do you expect we'll find a wolf? Ah, there's that King Charles cavalier, Mr. Ermine—for all the world as though he had stepped from an old frame. I do think he is lovely."

"Oh, bother that yellow Indian," snapped Butler jerkily.

"Why do you say that? I find him perfectly new. He never bores me, and he stood between me and that enraged savage." She shook her bridle rein. "Come, Mr. Shockley, let us ride to Ermine. At least you'll admire him."

The independent and close-lipped scout was riding outside the group. He never grew accustomed to the heavy columns, and did not talk on the march—a common habit of desert wanderers. But his eye covered everything. Not a buckle or a horse-hair or the turn of a leg escaped him, and you may be sure Miss Katherine Searles was detailed in his picture.

"Good morning, Mr. Ermine—you, too, are out after wolves, I see," sang Katherine, cheerily, as she rode up.

"No, ma'am, I don't care anything about wolves."

"What are you out for then, pray?"

His simple answer came: "Oh, I don't know. Thought I would like to see you after wolves. I guess that's why I am out."

"Well, to judge by the past few miles I don't think you will see me after them today."

"I think so myself, Miss Searles. These people ought to go back in the breaks of the land to find wolves; they don't give a wolf credit for having eyes. However, it does not matter whether we get one or none, anyhow."

"Indeed, it does matter. I must have a wolf."

"Want him alive or dead?" was the low question.

"What! Am I to have one?"

"You are," replied the scout, simply.

"When?"

"Well, Miss Searles, I can't order one from the quartermaster exactly, but if you are in a great hurry, I might go now."

"Mr. Ermine, you will surely kill me with your generosity. You have offered me your scalp, your body, and now a wolf. Oh, by the way, what did that awful Indian say to you? I suppose you have seen him since."

"Didn't say anything."

"Well, I hope he has forgiven you. But as I understand them, that's not the usual way among Indians."

"No, Miss Searles, he won't forgive me. I'm a-keeping him to remember you by."

"How foolish. I might give you something for a keepsake which would leave better memories, don't you think so?"

"You might, if you wish to."

The girl was visibly agitated at this. She fumbled about her dress, her hair, and finally drew off her glove and gave it to the scout, with a smile and a glance of the eye which penetrated Ermine like a charge of buckshot. He took the glove and put it inside of the breast of his shirt, and said, "I'll get the wolf."

Suddenly every one was whipping and spurring forward. The pack of greyhounds were streaking it for the hills.

"Come on!" yelled Shockley. "Here's a run!" And that mercurial young man's scales tipped right readily from his heart to his spurs.

"It's only a coyote, Miss Searles," said Ermine; but the young woman spatted her horse with her whip and rode bravely after the flying Shockley. Ermine's fast pony kept steadily along with her under a pull. The plainsman's long, easy sway in the saddle was unconscious, and he never took his eyes from the girl, now quite another person under the excitement.

"Oh, dear—my hat is falling off!" shrieked the girl.

"Shall I save it, Miss Searles?"

"Yes! yes!" she screamed. "Catch it!"

ERMINE brought his flying pony nearer hers on the off side and reached his hand toward the flapping hat, struggling at a frail anchorage of one hat-pin, but his arm grew nerveless at the near approach to divinity.

"Save it—save it!" she called.

"Shall I?" and he pulled himself together.

Dropping his bridle-rein over the pommel of his saddle, standing in his stirrups as steadily as a man in church, he undid the hat with both hands. When he had released it and handed it to its owner, she heard him mutter hoarsely.

"Oh, Mr. Ermine, I hope the pin did not prick you."

"No, it wasn't the pin."

"Ah," she ejaculated barely loud enough for him to hear amid the rushing hoof-beats.

The poor man was in earnest, and the idea drove the horses, the hounds, and the coyote out of her mind, and she ran her mount harder than ever. She detested earnest men, having so far in her career with the exception of Mr. Butler found them great bores. But drive as she would, the scout pattered at her side, and she dared not look at him.

These two were by no means near the head of the drive, as the girl's horse was a stager, which had been selected because he was highly educated concerning badger-holes and rocky hillsides.

Orderlies clattered behind them, and Private Patrick O'Dowd and Private Thompson drew long winks at each other.

"Oi do be thinkin' the long bie's harse could roon fasther if the divil was afther him."

"The horse is running as fast as is wanted," said Thompson.

"Did yez observe the bie ramove the hat from the lady, and his pony shootin' gravel into our eyes fit to smother?" shouted O'Dowd.

"You bet, Pat. And keeping the gait he could take a shoe off her horse, if she wanted it done."

"They say seein's believin', but Oi'll not be afther tellin' the story in quarters. Oi'm eight-year in the Army, and Oi can lie whin it's convanient."

The dogs overhauled the unfortunate little wolf despite its gallant efforts, and it came out of the snarling mass, as some wag had expressed it, "like a hog going to war—in small pieces." The field closed up and dismounted, soldier fashion, at the halt.

"What's the matter with the pony today, Ermine?" sang out Lewis. "Expected you'd be ahead of the wolf at least."

"I stopped to pick up a hat," he explained, and without further word regained his seat and loped away toward the post.

"Your horse is not a very rapid animal, Miss Searles," spoke Butler.

"Did you observe that? I didn't notice that you were watching me, Mr. Butler."

"Oh, I must explain that in an affair of this kind I am expected to sustain the reputation of the cavalry. I forced myself to the front."

"Quite right. I kept the only man who was capable of spoiling your reputation, in the rear. You are under obligations to me."

"That wild man, you mean. He certainly has a wonderful pony, but you need not trouble about him if it is to please me only."

"I find this sun is too hot," said Katherine Searles. "I think I'll go back."

"Then, I'll accompany you, Katherine."

"Miss Searles, if you please!"

"Dear me! What have I done! You permitted me to call you Katherine only last night." The officer ran his gauntlet over his eyes.

"Oh, I say, Miss Searles," said Shockley, riding up, "may I offer you one of my gauntlets? The sun, I fear, will blister your bare hand."

"No, indeed." And Butler tore off a glove, forcing it into her hand. She could not deny him, and pulled it on. "Thank you. I lost one of mine this morning."

Then she turned her eyes on Mr. Shockley with a hard little expression, which sealed him up. He was prompt to feel that the challenge meant war, and war with this girl was the far-away swing of that gallant strategic pendulum.

"Yes," Shockley added, "one is apt to drop things without noting them, in a fast rush. I dropped something myself this morning."

"What was it, Mr. Shockley?"

"It was an idea," he replied with a shrug.

THE young woman laughed and drove on, leaving a pall of dust behind. The little party made the cantonment and drew rein in front of the Searles quarters.

"Well, Katherine," said Mrs. Searles, "did you enjoy your ride?"

"Yes, mother, but my horse is such an old poke I was nowhere in the race. Besides, the young officers desert me once a wolf is sighted. They forget their manners at the first flash of a greyhound."

"I know, daughter, but what can you expect? They go out for that purpose."

"Mr. Ermine doesn't, or at least he is polite enough to say that he goes out to see me run, and not the wolf."

"Ermine!" Madam Searles betrayed some asperity. "Isn't he rather presumptuous? You'd better keep your distance."

"He's a delightful man, mother. So thoughtful and so handsome."

"Tut-tut, Katherine! He's only an ordinary scout—a wild man."

"I don't care! I like him!"

"Katherine, what are you thinking of?"

"Oh, I don'tknow, mother. I'm thinking what an absurd lot men are. They insist on talking nonsense at me."

"Well, my daughter, you must be careful not to provoke familiarity. I believe you use your eyes more than you should. Do not forget that quiet modesty is the most becoming thing in the world for a woman."

"I'm sure I do nothing. In fact, I have to be constantly menacing these military youths to keep them from coming too near, especially Mr. Shockley and Mr. Butler. I'm afraid every minute Mr. Butler will say more than I'm ready to hear."

Mrs. Searles was by no means averse to Butler's attentions to her daughter. "A very fine young man," was her comment when she thought of him.

* * * * *

The sun was about to depart. The families of the officers were sitting under their *ramadas* enjoying the cool. Butler and Shockley with two or three other men were seated with the Searleses when their attention was attracted by a commotion down by the quarters.

"What's the circus?"

"Don't make out. Seems to be coming this way. It is—why, it's the scout Ermine!"

The group sat expectantly and witnessed the approach of John Ermine on his horse. At some distance to one side rode Wolf-Voice, and gradually

through the dusk they made out some small animal between them—a dog-like thing.

The riders drew up before the Searleses' hut, and every one rose. The object was a scared and demoralized wolf with his tail between his legs. His neck was encircled by two rawhide lariats which ran to the pommels of the riders.

Ermine said, touching his hat, "Miss Searles, I have brought you the wolf."

"Goodness gracious, Mr. Ermine! I only said that in fun. What can I possibly do with a wolf?"

"I don't know. You said you wanted one, so here he is."

"Well, daughter, what are you going to do with it? Start a zoo?" Major Searles spoke in perplexity. "Take him down to the corral and lock him up," he told Ermine. "We'll see tomorrow what can be done with him."

Ermine and Wolf-Voice turned and drifted out into the gathering darkness with their forlorn tow. The major turned to the others.

"I have it," he cried. "We'll make up a purse, buy the wolf, and run him so soon as he gets over the effects of his capture."

"No, no, Papa, you mustn't offer Ermine money. He'd be awfully offended. That would be the very last thing to do to him."

IX

A TROOP of cavalry trotted along through the early morning dust, and Lieutenant Butler drew out at the Searleses' quarters, tying his horse for a moment in front, while he went inside. He did not stay long, but the sergeant in the rear thought he saw a girl come to the door and kiss him good-by. As the officer dashed to the head of the troop, the old sergeant dipped a smiling countenance deep into a plug of tobacco.

"Hello, there goes Butler with his troop," said Mr. Harding to Captain Lewis, as they basked in the morning sun before that officer's quarters.

"Yes, he goes to escort some wagons; but the fact is, internecine war has broken out in the post, and he goes for the good of the service. It's all about that wolf. Let's go down and take a look at it." The two proceeded to the quartermaster's corral, where they found a group standing about the wolf. It was held by a stout chain and lay flat on the ground, displaying an entire apathy concerning the surroundings, except that it looked "Injuny," as a passing muleskinner observed.

Major Searles rode in through the gate and sang out: "The Colonel has a few papers to sign, after which he says we will chase the wolf. So you can get ready, gentlemen, those who care to run." And then to Ermine, who stood near: "Miss Searles thinks that will be a proper disposition of your valuable present. Can you manage to turn him loose?"

"Why, yes, I suppose we can. But I won't take him out until you are all ready—every dog in the camp will fly at him. Can I have four or five soldiers to drive them off? Wolf-Voice and myself will be on horseback, and can't protect him."

"Certainly, certainly!" And under the Major's directions various soldiers armed themselves with whips, and undertook to make a rear-guard fight with the garrison pups.

Horses were saddled, and went clattering to all points of the post. The certainty of a run drew every one out. Shockley aided Miss Searles to mount, after which other women joined her, and a few men, all making for the quartermaster's.

"Your mother finds herself past riding, Miss Katherine," spoke one merry matron.

Katherine nodded. "Yes, Mother takes that view. I'm afraid I cannot sustain the reputation of the Searles outfit, as the phrase goes here. My horse is a Dobbin—Papa is so absurdly careful. There is no fun in being careful."

"Oh, the Major is right. He knows the value of that little nose of yours, and doesn't want it ploughed in the dirt. Noses which point upward, just ever so little, lack the severity of those that point down, in women. That's what the men tell me, Katherine."

The girl glanced at her companion, and doubted not that the men had said that to her.

"I don't care to go through life thinking of my nose," she replied, and at this juncture some men opened the corral gate, and the women passed in.

Seeing the wolf flattened out, Miss Searles exclaimed, "Poor creature! it seems such a shame." But when the Colonel rode out of the enclosure, she and the other women all followed.

The wolf rose to its feet with a snap as Wolf-Voice and Ermine approached, curling their lariats. A few deft turns, and the ropes drew around the captive's throat. A man undid the chain, the horses started, and the wild beast drew after, a whizzing blur of gray hair.

There was some difficulty in passing the gate, but that was managed. The remembrance of yesterday's experience in the rawhide coils came back to the wolf. It slunk along, tail down, and with head turning in scared anxious glances. Behind followed the rear-guard, waving their whips at various feeble-minded ki-yis which were emboldened by their own yelling.

"Colonel, give me a good start," Ermine called loudly. "This is a female wolf. I'll raise my hat and drop it on the ground when it is time to let the dogs go! We may have trouble clearing away these ropes. Watch my hat, Colonel. She may get away from us before we are ready."

WELL outside the post the colonel halted his field and waited. All eyes bent on the two wild men, with their dangerous bait, going up the road. Then, when well out, Wolf-Voice yelled, "Ah, dare go my rope!"

The wolf had cut it, and turning, fixed its eyes on Ermine, who stopped and shook his lariat carefully, rolling it in friendly circles toward the wolf. Wolf-Voice drew his gun, and for an appreciable time the situation had limitless possibilities. By the exercise of an intelligence not at all rare in wild creatures, the wolf lay down and clawed at the rope. In an instant it was free and galloping off, turning its head to study the strategy of the field.

"Wait for the people—she's going for the timber, and will get away," shouted Ermine, casting his big sombrero into the air.

"Ki-yi-yi-yi," called the soldiers, imitating the Indians who had so often swept in front of their guns.

The wolf fled, a gray shadow borne on the wind, making for the timber in the river-bottom. It had a long start and a fair hope. If it had understood how vain the noses of greyhounds are, it might have cut its angle to cover a little; for once out of sight it might soon take itself safely off. But no wild animal can afford to angle much before the spider dogs.

The field was bunched at the start and kicked up a vast choking dust, causing many slow riders to deploy out on the sides, where they could at least see the chase and the going in front of them. Wolf-Voice and Ermine had gone to opposite sides and were lost in the rush.

Ermine's interest in the wolf departed with it. He now swung his active pony through the dirt clouds, seeking the girl, and at last found her, well in the rear as usual, and unescorted, after the usual luck she encountered when she played her charms against a wolf.

She was trying to escape from the pall by edging off toward the river-bank. Ermine devoured her with his eyes. The powerful appeal which Katherine Searles made to his imagination was beyond the power of his analysis—the word love was unknown to his vocabulary. He wanted her body, he wanted her mind, and he wanted her soul merged with his. But as he looked at her now, his mouth grew dry, like a man in mortal fear or mortal agony.

And thinking thus, he saw her horse stop dead—sink—and go heels up and over in a complete somersault. The girl fluttered through the air and struck, raising a dust which almost concealed her. A savage slap of his quirt made his pony tear the ground in his frantic rush to her aid, and left him kneeling beside her. She showed no sign of life, but there was no blood or wound which he could see.

If this had been a man, or even any other woman, Ermine would have known what to do. But now as he took her wrist to feel her pulse, his own hands trembled so that he gave over. He could feel nothing but the mad torrent of his own blood.

Turning his face in the direction where the hunt had gone, he yelled, "Help! Help!" but the sound never reached the thudding hunt. Putting his arm under her shoulder, he raised her up, and supporting her, he looked hopelessly around until his eye fell on the Yellowstone only a short distance away. Water had always been what the wounded wanted. He slowly gathered her in his arms, gained his feet, and made his way toward the river. There he made fast work of his restoration, rubbing her wrists and sprinkling her forehead with water, but it was long before a reward came in the way of a sigh. He raised her in a sitting position against his knee.

"Breathe, Katherine—try again—now breathe." And he pressed her chest with his hand, aiding nature as best he knew, until she sighed again and again.

Her eyes spread, but soon closed in complete rest. She sensed kindly caresses and warm kisses which delighted her. The long yellow hair hung about her face and kept it shadowed from the hot sun.

"Oh my! Oh my! Where am I? Is that you— How do I—" but the effort exhausted her.

"God — God — Sak-a-war-te come quick! It will be too late." He put more water on her face.

* * * * *

The hunt missed the wolf in the cover of the river-bottom. It doubled on the dogs, and out of sight was out of mind with the fast-running hounds.

"She gave us a run, anyhow," sang out Major Searles, and laughing and talking, they trotted towards home.

"Where is Miss Searles, Major?" asked one of the hunters.

"That's so! don't know; had a slow horse. By Gad, we must look this up." And the now anxious father galloped his mount. The others followed sympathetically. Rounding the bluffs, they saw Ermine's pony quietly feeding.

"Where is Ermine?" came a hail of questions, and presently they almost ran over the girl's horse, lying on its side, breathing heavily.

"The horse is in a gopher-hole," said some one; "and see here—look at the dirt. He has thrown Miss Searles! Here is where she struck."

"Yes, but where is she? where is she?" ejaculated the Major. "Where is my girl?"

Wolf-Voice had dismounted and found Ermine's trail, which he followed toward the river.

"Come!" he called. "Am show you dose girl!"

While an orderly stayed behind to shoot the horse and get the empty saddle, the group followed hard on the half-breed.

"Done you ride on de trail, you was keep behine. Dey girl was broke his neck, an' Ermine am pack him."

Stepping briskly forward, the plainsman made quick work of empty moccasin tracks and burst through the brush. A pistol-shot rang in the rear. An orderly had shot the horse. A cry of "Help, help!" responded from the river beyond the cottonwoods, and the horses ploughed their way to the sands. The people all dismounted around the limp figure and kneeling scout.

"Here, Swan, ride to the post for an ambulance," spoke the Major, as he knelt and took his daughter in his arms. "Ride the horse to death and tell the ambulance to come running." He turned to the scout. "How was it, Ermine?" he asked.

The scout explained. "Will she live?" he asked anxiously.

In due course the ambulance came bounding behind the straining mules. Mrs. Searles was on the seat with the driver, hatless, and white with fear. The young woman was placed in and taken slowly to quarters, where the doctor declared that Miss Searles' injuries consisted of a few bruises and a general shock from which she would soon recover.

The cantonment slowly regathered its composure, all except Shockley, who sat, head down, in most disordered thought, slowly punctuating events as they came to him, by beating on the floor with his scabbard.

"And she gave him her glove and she never gave me any glove—and she never gave Butler her glove that I know of. And he gave her a wolf and he was with her when this thing happened. Say,

Shockley, me boy, you're too slow, you are rusty. If you saw an ancient widow woman chopping wood, you'd think she was in love with the wood-pile." And thus did that worthy arrive at wrong conclusions.

X

HARDING was at headquarters, and he had a complaint to make.

"Oh, I say, Captain Lewis, I am all ready to start. I have Ramon, a cook, and Wolf-Voice, together with pack-animals, but I can't get your man Ermine to say when he will go."

"That's odd, Harding." Lewis was puzzled. "I don't know of anything to detain him. What's the matter so far as you can determine?"

"I can't determine. He says he will go, but will not name any exact time. Tells me to push on and that he will catch up. That is a curious proposition."

"*Hmm.* I'll scout him up. You wait here awhile." Captain Lewis went in search of his man, whom he found whittling a stick.

"Well, my boy. Mr. Harding is all set. You said you'd go with him. A soldier must keep his word."

"I will go with him."

"When?"

Ermine arose. "If Mr. Harding will pull out now, Wolf-Voice will show him the way. I shall know where the Indian takes him, and in four days I will walk into his camp. The pack-ponies travel slowly. I do not care to punch pack-horses. That will do for Ramon and the cook."

"Does that go?"

"I have said it."

"All right. Mr. Harding will go now." With this Lewis left him, and in two hours the little cavalcade trotted westward, out into the hot, sunlit plains.

Three days took their slow departure, and on the morrow Ermine would have to make good his word to follow the Englishman. He would have liked to stay even if his body suffered slow fire, for he had not been able to see Miss Searles. But excuses would not avail for his honor. After supper, accordingly, he strolled along the officers' row, desperately forlorn, but hoping and yearning.

Major Searles approached him and held out his hand. "Of course, I can't be grateful enough for your attention to my daughter, Ermine," he said gruffly. "Come to my quarters, boy, and allow my daughter to thank you. She is quite recovered."

Together they made their way to the house, where Mrs. Searles shook his hand and said many motherly things.

"Please forgive me if I don't rise. It's the doctor's orders, you know." Miss Searles extended her hand, which the scout reverently took. At the same time her mother rose and she adjusted her hat. "I must run down to Mrs. Taylor's for a minute," she declared. "Her baby is very ill, and she has sent for me. You will stay here, Major," and she swept out.

"When do you depart for your hunting with Mr. Harding, Ermine?" asked Searles.

"I must go soon. He left camp three days ago, and I have promised to follow."

A passing officer appealed to the Major to come out. He was needed, together with other requests to follow, with reasons why haste was important.

"All right. You keep the wolves off, Ermine; I won't be gone a minute." Whereupon the officer took himself off, in complete disobedience to his wife's orders, and Ermine found himself alone again with Katherine.

This time she was not pale unto death, but warm and tingling.

"And when do you go, Mr. Ermine?" she asked sweetly.

"I go tomorrow."

"Very naturally there can be nothing to detain you here," she continued. "The fighting is over."

"There is something in the world beside fighting. You! You detain me."

"I! Really, I am quite recovered from my fall."

"You may have got well, Miss Searles, but I am not."

"Were you injured also?"

"Yes, so bad that I shall never get well unless you come to my rescue."

"I come to your rescue! What can I do?"

"Be my wife!" The dam had broken. He led his forlorn hope into the breach. "Come, Katherine, say you will marry me."

"Oh," she almost screamed, "I can't. Why, my mother would never consent. And what should we do if I did? We'd have to live in the mule corral."

"No, come to the mountains with me. I will make you a good camp."

SHE almost laughed aloud at this. "But I should make a poor squaw. I fear you'd have many quarrels with your dinner. Besides, my father wouldn't let me marry you. I like you, and you have been very good to me, but I had no idea we had gotten so far as this."

Ermine drew back. "Why did you kiss me then?"

"I didn't," she snapped.

They were now looking straight into each other's eyes. Fear had departed from Ermine's and all graciousness from hers. Divested of their seductive flashes, he saw the eyes of his photograph, and slowly reaching into the bosom of his shirt, drew out the buckskin bag and undid it. Turning to the straining light, he gazed a moment, and then said, "It is you!"

"I!—what is I?"

He handed the much-soiled photograph. She regarded it.

"Why, how on earth did you come by this, Mr. John Ermine?"

"Sak-a-war-te sent it to me in the night. He meant that I should seek the woman until I found her. Then she would be my wife."

She scanned the photograph again, and said in an undertone: "Taken last year in New York, and for him. Yet you have it away out here in the middle of this enormous desert. He surely would not give it away to you. I do not understand." She returned the card. "Who is this Sak-a-war-te?"

"He is God," said the scout.

She started up. "You are joking, Mr. Ermine."

"I am not joking," cried the excited man. "I have found you. I must believe what the spirits say to me when they take my mind from me and give it to you. You say you would have to live in the corral with mules," he went on. "Is that because I have so little money?"

"No, it is not money. I do not know how much you have."

"I have often taken enough gold out of the ground in a few days to last me a year."

"Yes, yes, but that is not the only thing necessary."

"What is necessary, then? Tell me what you want."

"There would have to be a great deal of love, you know. That is why one marries. I've had the attention of many young men like yourself, Mr. Ermine, but I couldn't marry any one of them unless I loved him."

"And then you do not love me?" This in a low, far-away voice.

"No, I do not. I have given you no reason to think I did. I like you, and I am sorry for you, now that I know in what way you regard me. Sit down again and let me tell you." She crouched herself on the edge of her chair, and he sat in his, revolving his big hat in both hands between his knees. "I was not thinking of marrying any one," she went on. "As for living in the mule corral, I was only joking about that. There might be worse places. I should dearly love a gold mine, but don't you understand there would have to be something else—I should have to give you something before we thought of marrying."

"I see it—it all comes to me now," he labored. "You would have to give me something, and you won't give me yourself. Then give me back my mind—give me the peace which I always had until I saw you. Can you do that, Miss Searles?" It was all so strange, this quiet appeal, that she passed her hand across her forehead in despair. "If you will not make my dreams come true," he went on, still pleading, "if you will not do what God intends—then I must take my body away from here. And I know now that you will soon forget me. Then I will be John Ermine, riding among the hills, empty as an old buffalo carcass, moving without life."

"Stop, please stop! I cannot stand this sort of thing, my dear Mr. Ermine."

"You have my mind. You have all the mind I ever had." And his voice dropped until she could distinguish only wild

gutturals. He was talking to himself in the Indian language.

Springing up quickly, she flew through the house, and out of door. A moment later Mrs. Searles entered from the front.

"Why, Mr. Ermine, where is Katherine, and where is the Major? Why, you are all alone!"

"Yes, I am all alone," said the scout, quietly, and before she could comprehend, he was gone.

* * * * *

It was much later that evening when Ermine was summoned to Captain Lewis' tent. Major Searles was with the chief of scouts.

"Ermine," said the captain, "I understand that during the temporary absence of her father this evening, you asked Miss Searles to marry you."

"I did, sir."

"Don't you think you took an unfair advantage of her father's absence?"

"I don't know, sir," Ermine replied. "A man doesn't speak to a woman before other men."

Captain Lewis emitted a slight cough. He knew the law of convention, and he knew the customs of men, but they did not separate readily in his mind.

"In any event, Ermine, the young lady had given you no encouragement which would warrant you in going to the length of proposing marriage to her. Further, Miss Searles distinctly doesn't want attention of any kind from you. To this I will add, her father and mother forbid you all association in the future. Do you understand?"

The scout remained silent.

"And," interpolated the father, "I may add that my daughter is already engaged to be married to Lieutenant Butler, which will end the matter."

If the evening's occurrences had set the nerves of the Searles family on edge, it had torn the scout's into shreds. But he managed his stoicism.

"Now, my boy," continued Captain Lewis, with a sense of benevolence, "we do not mean to be hard on you. We all, including Miss Searles, feel for you."

"I know what you feel for me, Captain Lewis. and Major Searles." It was evident that Ermine was now aroused. "You feel that I am an uneducated man, without money, and that I do not wear a white shirt. You think I am a dog. But you did not think I was a dog when the Sioux had your wagon-train surrounded and your soldiers buffaloed. You did not think I was a dog when I kept you all from freezing to death last winter. But here among the huts and the women I am a dog.

"I do not understand such men as you. You have two hearts: One is red and the other is blue, and you feel with the one that best suits you at the time. Your blue heart pities me. Me, a warrior and a soldier! Do you give pity with your coffee and sow-belly? Is that what you feed a soldier on?" And the scout slapped his hat on his head.

"Steady, steady, my boy; don't you go up in the air on us," said Lewis, persuasively. "I did not mean to offend you, and we want to be friends. But you keep your feet on the ground and don't go raring and pitching, or we may forget you."

"Yes; that is it—forget me! You may forget me. What's more, you can do it now. I am going far away, so that your eyes will not remind you."

"You are going to make your word good to Mr. Harding, aren't you?" asked the chief of scouts.

"What good is a dog's word?" came the bitter reply.

The major said little, but remained steadily studying the face of the scout; rising, he approached him with extended hand. "If you are going away, let us part friends, at least. Here is my hand, and I shall not forget you. Nor do I think you are a dog."

The scout took the major's hand mechanically, and also that of Lewis, which Lewis offered in turn, saying:

"In the morning I will see that you get your pay, and if you conclude to return, I will find you employment."

"Thank you, sir. I did not come here for money. I came here to help you fight the Sioux, and to be a man among white men."

"You certainly have shown yourself a man among men—no one has ever questioned that," said the Major.

"Then why is it wrong for a man

among men to want your daughter to be his wife?"

"It is not wrong, but you have gone about the matter wrong. I have tried to make it plain that her hand is promised to Mr. Butler."

AS THIS was said, two horses trotted up to Captain Lewis' quarters. A man dismounted, gave his horse to the other, and Butler himself strode heavily into the room. He was unshaven, booted, and armed.

"Hello, Major! Hello, Lewis! I'm just in with my troop, and if you will pardon me, I will have a word with Mr. Ermine here." He addressed the scout with icy directness. "May I ask, Mr. Ermine, if you have about your person a photograph of Miss Searles?"

"I have, sir."

"Mr. Ermine, that photograph is my property. I demand that you hand it over to me."

"Mr. Butler, you will only get that photograph from my dead body. You have Miss Searles—is not that enough?"

"I will then take it by force from you!" A tremendous bang roared around the room, and the little group was lost in smoke.

Butler turned half round, his six-shooter going against the far wall with a crash. He continued to revolve until caught in the major's arms. Lewis sprang to his desk, where his pistol lay, and as he turned, the smoke lifted, revealing Butler lying against the major's chest, wildly waving his left arm and muttering savagely between short breaths. Ermine was gone.

"Fire on that man!" yelled Lewis to the orderly outside, taking one shot himself at the fleeing figure of the scout.

The soldier jerked his carbine and thrashed about the breech-block with a cartridge. "I can't see him, Captain!" he shouted.

"Fire at him, anyway! Fire, I tell you!" And the man discharged his rifle in the direction in which Ermine's figure had disappeared.

Simultaneously with the shots, the garrison bugles were drawling "Taps," but they left off with an expiring pop. The lights did not go out in quarters, and the guard turned out with much noise of shoe leather and rattle of guns. This body soon arrived, and Lewis spoke from the porch of his quarters.

"The scout, Ermine, has just shot Lieutenant Butler in the arm! He ran that way! Chase him! Go quickly, or he will get away. Shoot instantly if he resists—and he will, I think."

The guard shuffled off in the darkness and beat up the camp to no purpose. The soldiers stood about, speculating in low voices and gradually quieting as the word passed about on the uneasy wings of gossip that Ermine had shot Butler in the arm, wounding him badly, and that the scout had gone into the earth or up in the air, for divil the hide nor hair of him could the guard find.

XI

NEAR the summit of red cliffs Ermine looked down into the valley of his quest. There were Ramon's pack-ponies—he remembered them all. There curled the smoke from the tangle of brushwood in the bottom, and finally Wolf-Voice and Ramon came out to gather in the horses for the night. He rode down toward them.

"Are you alone in the camp?" he demanded, as he came up. "Has no one been here?"

"No; what for waas any one here?" asked and answered the half-breed.

The men drove the horses in while Ermine made his way through the brush to the camp-fire where Harding was sitting.

"Aha! Glad to see you, Mr. Ermine. My word! but you must have put your horse through. He is barely holding together in the middle. Picket him out, and we will soon have some coffee going."

Ermine did as directed and was soon squatting before the fire with his cup and plate.

"How did you leave every one at the camp?"

Ermine borrowed a pipe and interspersed his answers with puffs.

"Left them in the night—and they were all sitting up to see me off. My pony is weak, Mr. Harding. Will you give me a fresh one in the morning? We

ought to start before daylight and make a long day of it."

"My dear man, before daylight? Are we in such haste?"

"This is bad country. Indians of all tribes are coming and going. We are better off back in the range."

The last rasping, straining pack-rope had been laid while yet the ghostly light played softly with the obscurity of the next morning. The ponies were forced forward, crashing through the bushes, floundering in the creek, cheered on by hoarse oaths, all strange to the ear of Harding who nevertheless congratulated himself on the unexpected energy of his guide—it would produce results later when wanted in the hunting. The ponies strung out ahead to escape the persecution of the lash, but Wolf-Voice saw something new in it all. He turned his pony alongside of Ermine's.

"Say, John, what for you waas keep look behin'? De Sioux, she broke hout?"

"Well, I did that back there which will make the high hills safer for me than any other place. Don't say anything to Mr. Harding until I feel safe. I want to think."

"You waas shoot some one, mabeso?"

"Yes—Butler. He said he would force me to give up the paper we found down the Yellowstone a year ago. He pulled his pistol, and I shot him."

"Kiell heem—hey?"

"No, caught him in the arm. It will not kill him. I may go back and do that—when the soldiers forget a little."

"Den you waas run away—hey?"

"Yes. I made the grass smoke from Tongue River to here. I don't think they can follow me, but they may follow this party. That's why I look behind, Wolf-Voice, and that's why I want you to look behind."

"What for you waas come, anyhow?"

"I wanted coffee and tobacco and a fresh pony and more cartridges, and it will be many moons before John Ermine will dare look in a trader's store. If the white men come, I will soon leave you. If I do, you must stay and guide Mr. Harding."

The energy of the march turned satisfaction to distress in Mr. Harding's mind. He pleaded for more deliberation, but it went unheeded. The sun had gone behind the hard blue of the main range before they camped, and the good nature of the Englishman departed with it.

"Why is it necessary to break our cattle down by this tremendous scampering?" he demanded. "It does not appeal to my sense of the situation." But later, from behind his pipe, he spoke more gently. "Of course, Ermine, I am willing to do what is proper, and we will continue this vigorous travel if you can make the necessity of it plain to me. Frankly, I do not understand why we are doing it, and I ask you to tell me."

ERMINE removed his pipe and said slowly: "Mr. Harding, I shot Butler, and the soldiers are after me. I have to go fast—you don't—that's all."

The gentleman addressed opened wide eyes. "Did you kill him?"

"No," replied Ermine.

Mr. Harding took the scout out of reach of other ears, and made him tell the story of the affair, with most of the girl left out.

"Why did you not give him the photograph?"

"Because he said he would make me give it and drew his pistol, and what is more, I am going back to kill the man Butler—after a while. We must go fast tomorrow, then I will be where I am safe, for a time at least."

All this gave Harding a sleepless night. He had neither the power nor the inclination to arrest the scout. He did not see how the continuance of his hunt would interfere with final justice, and he hoped to calm the mood and stay the murderous hand of the enraged man. So on the following morning, Harding suggested that he and Ermine begin the hunting, since fresh meat was needed in camp, and they started. In two hours they had an elk down and were butchering him. The antlers were in the velvet and not to the head-hunter's purpose. Making up their package of meat and hanging the rest out of the way of prowling animals, to wait a pack-horse, they sat down to smoke.

"Are you still intending to kill Mr. Butler?" ventured Harding.

"When you are through hunting, I shall begin—begin to hunt Butler."

"You will find your hunting very dan-

gerous, Ermine."

"It does not matter. He has got the girl, and he may have my life or I shall have his."

"But you cannot have the girl. Certainly after killing Butler the young lady will not marry you?"

"No, the girl would not marry me—I have forgotten her," mused Ermine, as he patiently lied to himself.

"Does this young woman wish to marry Butler?" asked Harding, who now recalled garrison gossip to the effort that all things pointed that way.

"She does."

"Then why do you kill the man she loves?"

"Because I do not want to think he is alive."

The wide vacancy of the scout's blue eyes, together with the low deliberation in his peaceful voice, was appalling to Harding. He never had thought of a murderer in this guise. He labored with himself to believe it was only a love-sickness of rather alarming intenseness but there was something about the young man which gave this idea pause. His desperation in battle, his Indian bringing-up, made it all extremely possible, and Harding searched in vain for any restraining forces. Finally, resuming his talk, Harding suggested that his guide go to his own friends, who might advise him more potently than he was able, and ended by asking pointedly, "You have friends, I presume?"

"I have one friend," answered the youth, sullenly.

"Who is he?"

"Crooked-Bear," came the reply.

"Crooked-Bear is your friend. Then you must listen to him; what he advises will probably be the thing to do."

"Of course I will listen to him," said Ermine. "He is the only person in the world I care for now. I have often heard him talking to himself, and I think he has known a woman whom he cannot forget. He will not want me to seek my enemy's life. I have talked too much, Mr. Harding. Talk weakens a man's heart. I will make no more talk."

"Well, then, my man, go to your friend; I can do nothing more," and Harding arose. They tied their meat on the saddles, mounted, and sought their camp. On the following morning Ermine had gone.

* * * * *

The heart of Ermine hung like a leaden weight in his body, as he cast accustomed glances at the old trail up the mountain to Crooked-Bear's cabin. He heard the dogs bark, and gave the wolf's call which was the hermit's countersign. Then from out of a dark corner came the goblin of the mountain, ready with his gun for the unwelcome, but to greet Ermine with what enthusiasm his silent forest ways had left him. For a long time they held each other's hands, while their faces lighted with pleasure. Then as they built the fire and boiled the water Ermine told his story.

"Crooked-Bear, I wanted a white girl for my wife, and I shot a soldier, who drew a revolver and said he would force me to give him her picture which I had in my pocket. Then I ran away, everybody shooting at me. They may even come here for me. They want to stand me up beside the long table with all the officers sitting around it, and they want to take me out and hang me on a tree for the ravens and magpies to pick at. That is what your white people want to do to me, Crooked-Bear, and they are going to have a chance to do it, for I am going back to kill the man and get the girl or die. Do you hear that, Crooked-Bear, do you hear that?"

The hermit nodded gravely. "Be calm, boy," he said, "let us talk more of this thing. Be calm, and I can find a reason why you will not want to stain your hands with this man's blood. When I sent you to the white men to do a man's work in a white man's way, I did not think you would lock horns with any buck you met on the trail, like the dumb things that carry their reason for being on the point of their antlers. Sit down." And the long arms of the hermit waved with a dropping motion.

ERMINE sat down, but by no means found his composure. "I knew, Croked-Bear, I knew you would talk this way. It is the soft talk of the white men. She made a fool of me, and he was going to put his foot on me as

though John Ermine was a grasshopper, and every white man would say to me after that, 'Be quiet, Ermine, sit down.' Bah! I will be quiet and I will sit down until they forget a little, and then—" Ermine emitted the savage snarl of a lynx in a steel trap. "And then, I tell you, I will kill him as surely as day follows night."

"But, my boy, you must not see red in a private feud. That is only allowed against the enemies of the whole people. Your heart has gone to your head. You can never win a white woman by spilling the blood of the other man who happens to love her also. That is not the way with them."

"No, it is not the way with them. It is the way with their women to set a man on fire and then laugh at him, and it is the way with their men to draw a gun. What do they expect, Crooked-Bear? I ask you that! Ah, yes, I know, Crooked-Bear, that you wanted a girl to marry you once, and because she would not, you have lived all your life up here in these rocks, and you will die here. I am not going to do that. I am going to make others drink with me this bitter drink, which will sweeten it for me."

Sadly the hermit saw his last interest on earth pass from him. "I had hoped," he said to himself, "to be able to restore this boy to his proper place among the white people, but I have failed. I do not understand why men should be so afflicted in this world as Ermine and I have been, but doubtless it is the working of a great law, and possibly of a good one. My long years as a hunter have taught me that the stopping of the heart-beat is no great thing—it is soon over. But the years of living that some men are made to undergo is a very trying matter. Brave and sane is the man who truly keeps his faith. I fear for the boy."

AFTER a few weeks Ermine could no longer bear with the sullen savagery of his emotions, and he took his departure. Crooked-Bear sat by his cabin door and saw him tie his blanket on his saddle —saw him mount and extend his hand, which he shook. They parted without a word.

They had grown accustomed to this ending. There was nothing in words that mattered now.

The prophet's boy disappeared in the gloom of the woods, snapping bushes, and rolling stones, until there was no sound save the crackling of the fire on the lonely hearth. . . .

Day after day Ermine crawled through the rugged hills far from the places where men might be, for every one was his enemy, and any chance rifle would take away from him his vengeance. The tale of his undoing had traveled wide—he found that out in the Crow camp where he had traded with his relatives for a new pony. Ba-cher-hish-a had told him that through her tears. He could trust no one. The scouts at Tongue River might be apathetic in an attempt to capture him, but they could not fail to report his presence if seen in the vicinity.

Butler was probably in the middle of the log-town, which swarmed with soldiers, but it was there he must go, and he had one friend left, just one—the Night.

HAVING arrived in the vicinity of the post, he prowled out on foot with his only friend. It was early, for he must do his deed while yet the lights were lit. Any one moving about after "taps" would surely be investigated by the guard.

He had laid aside his big hat, and was wrapped in his blanket. Many Indians were about, and he was less apt to be spoken to or noticed.

He moved forward to the scout fire, which was outside of the guard-line, and stood for a time in some brushwood, beyond the play of the flames. He was closely enveloped in his blanket, and although Indians passed quite near him, he was not noticed. Suddenly he heard a detail of wagons clanking up the road, and conjectured rightly that they would go into the post. He ran silently toward them, and stooping low, saw against the skyline that the cavalry guard had worked up in front, impatient to shave the time when they should reach their quarters.

It was a wood train, and it clanked and ground and jingled to the quartermaster's corral, bearing one log on the

last wagon which was John Ermine and his fortunes.

This log slid to the ground and walked swiftly away.

* * * * *

The time for "taps" was drawing near, and the post buzzed in the usual expectation of that approaching time of quiet. A rifle-shot rang loud and clear up on the officers' row—it was near Major Searles' house, every one said. Women screamed, and Tongue River cantonment laid its legs to the ground as it gathered to the place. Mrs. Searles and her daughter were clasped in each other's arms, as Searles ran out with his gun.

The shot had been right under the window of his sitting-room. An Indian voice greeted him, "Don' shoot! Me killi him!"

"Who are you?" demanded Searles.

"Don' shoot! Me Ahhaeta—all same Sharp-Nose. Don' shoot—me killi him."

"Killi who? Who have you killed? Talk up quick!"

"Me killi him. You come—you see."

By this time the crowd drew in with questions and eager to help. A sergeant arrived with a lantern, and the guard laid rude hands on the Crow scout, Sharp-Nose, who was well known. He was standing over the prostrate figure, and continued to reiterate, "Me killi him."

The lantern quickly disclosed the man on the ground to be John Ermine, late scout and fugitive from justice, shot through the heart and dead, with his blanket and rifle on the ground beside him. As he looked through the window, he had been stalked and killed by the fool whom he would not allow to shake hands with Katherine Searles. A few moments later, when Sharp-Nose was brought into her presence, between two soldiers, she recognized him when he said: "Mabeso, now you shake hands."

"Yes, I will shake hands with you, Sharp-Nose," and half to herself, as she eyed her malevolent friend, she muttered, "and he kept you to remember me by."

POWDERSMOKE PAY-OFF

The Englishman called "Hyphen" Jones takes over a cattle ranch close to the Border—and runs into a renegade's rustler roost!

I

GRAY dust boiled thick behind the Antelope stage as it jounced into Cactus and drew up before the Western House. The passenger who levered his long form through the low doorway and stepped gingerly down into the street was, as "Foghorn" would have expressed it, "a sight for sore eyes." Garbed in loose gray tweeds, with stout brogues and stylish fedora, he was as much out of place as a stag in a steer herd.

But that did not nonplus Gerald Smythe-Jones. His clean-shaven features wore a whimsical smile, emphasized by a quirk at the corners of his flexible lips. The bland solemnity of his blue eyes were belied by twin imps of devilment dancing in their depths.

A COW COUNTRY NOVEL

The panicked steers thundered down the valley (CHAP. III)

The sheriff, Dan Harris, lounging with unbuttoned vest upon the bench that fronted the Western House, watched the newcomer with growing amazement. Queer birds of passage alighted in Cactus, but this one was the queerest yet.

"Depart from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it!"

At sound of the high-pitched, rasping

BY **TOM WEST**

tones, the stranger swung around in startled surprise. The quirk around his lips deepened at sight of a short, spare figure in rumpled blue shirt, shabby dark pants stuffed into knee boots. Coarse iron-gray hair straggled from beneath the newcomer's shapeless Stetson. Deep-set beneath jutting brows, dark eyes glittered with fanatical fervor. Beneath one arm he clutched a heavy black-bound book; the other was outstretched accusingly toward Smythe-Jones.

"Evil to him who evil thinks, old bean," chuckled the tweeded young man. "Believe me, my heart is as pure as driven snow!"

A blocky rider elbowed past the evangelist. "You the Jones jasper, come tuh take over the CCC?" he inquired.

"I am Gerald Smythe-Jones. The last two words are hyphenated. I presume you are—"

"Tim Coghlan, foreman of the CCC," cut in the other. "Don't let Pete faze yuh, he thumps the Bible regular."

"Is strong drink available in this godly town?"

"All yuh kin carry."

"Then let us mark this happy occasion by a small potion."

"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging," grated the preacher harshly as they headed across the street. Then he turned away, mounted a shaggy mule and moved slowly down the street.

"Quite a character!" commented Smythe-Jones, as the pairshuffled toward The Bull Pen.

"Kinda locoed, I reckon," returned the foreman. "You should see his gal, pritty as a painted wagon! Teaches McCleod School."

"And is she—religious?"

"Hell, no! Mildred's as level-headed as a jedge, babies the old man like a mother. Ef it warn't fer her I guess he'd ferget tuh eat. Pete is shore bugs on the Bible."

THEY pushed through the batwings of the saloon. McTigh, the brawny barkeep, slid a bottle and two glasses across the mahogany.

The foreman poured three fingers. Smythe-Jones trickled out a like amount, then gazed inquiringly at the barkeep. "Have you a little—er—soda?"

Mac scratched his head.

"It's a liquid, my dear fellow," explained the Englishman patiently. "One mixes it with whiskey."

"Not in this saloon," replied Mac darkly.

Smythe-Jones shrugged. "Oh, well, when in Rome do as Rome does!" He raised his glass. "Here's mud in your eye!" He drained it and put it down. "I say, Tim," he drawled, "just what did the pater tell you about me?"

The foreman built a smoke. "Wal, I didn't git word from no pater. Some jasper wrote from Chicago that the Colorado Cattle Company had sold out lock, stock and barrel to a gent by the name of Smith-Jones."

"Smythe, spelt with a 'y,' hyphen, Jones."

"He said this Hyphen Jones hairpin was sendin' out his son from England tuh take over. Asked me tuh string along, hold the crew together and ease him over the rough spots. Guess thet's all."

"Excellent!" murmured the Englishman. "Are the affairs of the—aw—ranch, prospering?"

Tim considered his drink gloomily. "Wal, they ain't what they should be. Not by a dang sight. They's too many rustlers skitterin' around the Bad Lands." His eyes narrowed as the batwings flung back to admit a swarthy, resplendent figure. "And heah's their doggoned kingpin, Carlos Compana—slick as a greased hawg."

Carlos Compana crunched briskly across the sanded floor.

"The Saints smile! Eet ees the Senor Teem!" he cried. "We weel 'ave wan dreenk, eh?"

Tim nodded curtly. Compana, tossing a double-eagle on the bar, eyed Smythe-Jones' tweeded form. "You come from the beeg city, yes?" he queried.

"Rather! I've taken over the CCC. Do you ranch?"

The 'breed's features wrinkled into a dusky smile. *"Si, senor,"* he chuckled. "We shall be neighbors. My brand ees the Treeple O."

Wordlessly, with the pointed toe of his riding boot, Tim traced CCC on the sanded floor. Then, with slow deliberation, he joined the gaps between the arms of each C, making OOO. "Git it?" he growled to the Englishman. He pivoted, to face Carlos. Half-crooked, his fingers itched at the smooth butt of a big .45 on his right hip.

Carlos' swarthy features tautened. "The senor jests?" he murmured, with a quick glance that took in the foreman's bent gun-arm—and Mac lifting a sawed-off shotgun from beneath the bar.

"Take it any way yuh want, Carlos," said Tim softly.

With a gust of throaty laughter, the Mexican tossed his drink down and set his empty glass on the bar.

The girl, with bloodless face and dilated eyes, was standing stiffly, a stubby derringer gripped tightly in her right hand (CHAP. IV)

Then with an airy wave of the hand he swiftly swung away and clinked toward the street.

"Dear me!" drawled Smythe-Jones. "I really believe I am going to enjoy my sojourn in Antelope Valley." He smiled benignly at the barkeep. "May we have another bottle?"

Meanwhile, in the sheriff's office, Dan

Harris leaned back in his squeaky swivel chair and studied a sheet of notepaper, covered with feminine handwriting. Watching him were his two deputies, huge "Bull" Bennett and squat, barrel-chested 'Pache. He glanced up from the letter.

"You jaspers lamp thet pilgrim?"

"Shore," snapped 'Pache. "A dog-blasted Limey!"

"Would yuh say thet this description fitted the hairpin?" Harris read aloud. " 'Gerald may not be imposing in appearance, but he has innate good qualities. Unfortunately, he is easily led, and, I must confess, has run wild. Latterly, his drinking escapades and an affair with a kitchen maid have become so insufferable that my husband has purchased a ranch in your vicinity and given it to Gerald on condition he emigrate immediately. We think that in the wilds of America, far removed from strong drink and designing women, he may develop manly qualities.' "

"I reckon thet's the jasper," commented 'Pache. "He's lickerin' up right now in The Bull Pen."

"Button up, and lissen!" grunted the sheriff. " 'In order that you may recognize our son when he arrives. I will endeavor to describe him. Height, five feet six inches; dark, curly hair; dark—"

"Hell!" cut in Bull. "This jasper's six feet, ef he's an inch, and he's a towhead."

The sheriff nodded. "We gotta figger this out. 'Pears they's shenanigans afoot."

TWO hilarious figures banged through the batwings of The Bull Pen as the sun slanted westward. Jim Hudkins, the portly liveryman, obligingly hitched a pair of half-broken broncs to the CCC buckboard the foreman had driven to town. Tim scrambled clumsily up to the driver's seat, plunked down and grabbed the lines. Smythe-Jones pressed a dollar into Jim's plump palm and swung up beside his foreman.

"Gittup!" yelled Tim.

The two ponies shot out of the corral gate like twin bullets. Necks stretched, teeth bared and ears laid back, the ponies streaked down Main Street, the buckboard bouncing and swaying in a dust fog behind them. Adobes on the outskirts, piles of tin cans that fringed the cowtown like a rusty stubble of beard, flashed past. Around flowed a vast mesquite plain, across which the wagon road curled like a grey serpent.

The broncs hit straight ahead, left the swerving wagon road, headed through the sage and mesquite. With a crash, the front off-wheel hit a boulder. Spokes splintered. The buckboard toppled sideways. In a flurry of arms and legs, the two passengers were projected into the air—to descend with what Smythe-Jones later described as "sickening thuds." The half-crazed team dragged the overturned vehicle for a hundred paces or so. Then the dead weight brought them to a sweating stop.

Meanwhile, the Englishman crawled out of a clump of thorny mesquite and staggered to his feet. Close by Tim, scratched and sobered, rose from the sage, fingered himself cautiously and found no broken bones. Wadding his bandana, he endeavored to staunch the flow of blood from a gory nose.

"Ah, a sail!" exclaimed Smythe-Jones. "Ho, ho for a flag of distress!" He commenced vigorously to wave a white handkerchief.

A girl loped toward them across the carpet of sage and reined up sharply. There was concern in her grave dark eyes. Pretty, thought Smythe-Jones, despite her rough puncher's garb. Thick ringlets of brown hair cascaded from beneath her Stetson. Then she spoke and, to the Englishman's surprise, her voice was soft and cultured.

"Are you hurt?"

Tim continued to dab morosely at his nose. "Nope, Miss June, them doggoned broncs spooked."

The girl's smooth forehead puckered. "Were you handling the lines, Tim?" The foreman nodded dolefully. "Then how—"

"Drunk," explained Smythe-Jones solemnly. "Thoroughly inebriated! I tried to restrain him, madam, but," he sighed, "strong drink weaves ropes of steel. Were I an evangelist, I could say 'it rageth like a lion.' "

June Boulderson's small nose wrinkled. "I believe you are both drunk! And I hope you have to walk every yard back

to town!" She whirled her pony, rowelled and loped northward toward Cactus. Tim watched her going with tragic eyes.

"Doggone it," he burst out. "Boss or no boss, I got a good mind tuh climb yore hump. I was particular sweet on thet girl and now you plumb ruint my hand!"

Arm hooked, he swung a haymaker at the Englishman's jaw. Smythe-Jones' long body swayed back. Tim's bunched fist whizzed past his chin. Still slightly befuddled, the foreman staggered from the impetus of the blow.

"Tut, tut," chided Smythe-Jones. "Atrocious timing! And your footwork! Execrable!"

Again Tim bored in. Smythe-Jones sank a right jab into his midriff that brought him up gasping. A swift uppercut caught him below the chin. He tried to backstep, tangled his feet in the brush, tripped and fell ignominiously on his back. Before he could regain his feet, Smythe-Jones was sitting comfortably on his broad chest, waving a slender forefinger.

"Let us cease this unseemly wrangling, old bean," he suggested paternally. "Fisticuffs are for small boys. For your information, I held the intercollege welterweight boxing trophy in my senior year. I was not aware that the charming young lady was the apple of your eye. Shall we shake and be good friends?"

Tim's rugged features creased in a grin. "Shore, you're the champ, Hyphen."

Smythe-Jones rose and extended a helping hand to his companion. Together they broke through the brush toward the team, anchored to the smashed buckboard.

"Reckon we ride home bareback," Tim announced ruefully, and commenced unhitching the team.

LONG after the CCC crew had jingled out in pairs the following morning, Smythe-Jones slowly and stiffly crossed the yard. Tim grinned as he met his boss.

"Have you any suggestions as to how I should spend the day?" the Englishman inquired.

"Figgered you'd like tuh take a looksee over the spread."

"Ride?"

"Ain't no other way."

Smythe-Jones sighed. "Heaven have mercy on my blistered buttocks!"

On a high bench, the foreman drew rein and indicated the terrain below with a sweep of his arm. "Wal, Hyphen, I reckon thet's the CCC."

The Englishman gazed at the far-flung vista in silence. "A vast country!" murmured Smythe-Jones, almost with awe. His voice lifted. "And where does friend Carlos reside?"

The foreman indicated the distant hills. "In the Bad Lands. The Smokies are a dang sight farther than you'd figger. They's a big stretch of hell in between, yuh might call it the Devil's dumpin' ground. Thet's whar Carlos raises cows." He emphasized "raises," as his arm swiveled northward. "Bill Boulderson's—thet's June's uncle—Boxed B lays thetaways. We've had trouble with the old range hawg."

"Do we own this—kingdom?"

"Wal, we ain't filed on it, ef thet's what yuh mean. It's most free range, government land, but I reckon we got heah fust."

"H'm," mused Smythe-Jones, "might is right, so to speak. Well, I suggest we return to the ranch. I am still rather—sore."

But the lanky Smythe-Jones was not too sore to head for Cactus after a midday snack. On a fast-stepping piebald from Tim's string, he jogged into town and dismounted at the Valley Merchandise Store. Here he purchased riding boots, plaid shirt, pants, Stetson and other riding accessories, bundled them behind the cantle and hit for The Bull Pen.

In a row of cow ponies hitched outside the saloon, a big grey stood out like a diamond in a string of glass beads. The Englishman whistled softly as his gaze took in its clean limbs, the proud arch of the neck, small head and spirited eyes. He tied his pony and approached the grey. Speaking softly, he caressed its smooth muzzle.

"Eet ees wan fine hoss, eh?" A deep voice at his shoulder pulled his head around.

"By Jove, it certainly is!" he agreed.

Carlos Compana caressed his smudge of mustache. "Eet ees the best hoss in"—he waved airily—"in the world."

A speculative light gleamed in the Englishman's eyes.

"Come, come!" he protested. "That's quite a stretch of territory. The horse has its good points, but still—"

"My fren," returned Carlos impressively. "'ave you an animal that can beat heem?"

The Englishman's thin nose twitched as though he scented a juicy morsel. "Maybe," he replied carelessly, noting at the same time that a crowd was gathering.

"And would you make a small wager?"

Smythe-Jones smiled hesitantly. "Now you are pinning me down! But I will say this—I will produce an animal that will outrun your grey over—well, a hundred-mile stretch."

Carlos hauled a leather pouch from a pants pocket and spilled a golden stream into the palm of his hand. "Fifty gold pieces, wan thousand dollars. They all say my grey is keeng."

Smythe-Jones shook his head. "My dear fellow, I am rich in cows, not coin of the realm. But I will match fifty steers, market value fifteen hundred dollars, against your grey."

Carlos shook his head decisively.

"A little scared, perhaps?" smiled Smythe-Jones.

"Carlos Compana ees scared of no wan!"

"Well, old bean, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Fifty steers against your horse."

Carlos hesitated. If he refused the wager, the story would be all over Antelope Valley before another sunup: Carlos Compana had been bluffed by a dude, an ignorant *Yanqui!*

"I weel accept!" he snapped.

"Splendid!" drawled Smythe-Jones. His lazy eyes surveyed the onlookers and lighted upon the star on Dan Harris' vest. "Ah, the sheriff! He shall be the arbitrator. Will you accept the nomination, old boy?"

Harris pushed forward. "Whose cow critters you wagerin'?"

"Why, the CCC's! Have you any objection?"

"Yore cows?"

"I have the bill of sale."

The sheriff smiled. "Wal, I reckon you kin wager what's yourn." He pulled a notebook from his dangling vest. "What's the deal?"

"I will dictate to avoid misunderstanding. 'I, Gerald Smythe-Jones—hyphen Jones!—hereby wager fifty steers against Carlos Compana's grey stallion that I will produce an animal to outrun said stallion over a hundred-mile course, the race to be run"—he thumbed his chin—"one week from today.'"

The sheriff wrote rapidly with a stub of pencil, ripped the sheet from his notebook and handed it to the Englishman. The latter signed carelessly, passed paper and pencil to Carlos. Without a word, the OOO owner scrawled his mark.

Dan Harris stowed the sheet in a pants pocket. "Now, fer the course. What d'you gents say tuh Silver City and back, twice. Thet's as close tuh a hundred miles as I kin figger."

"I abide by your excellent judgment," smiled Smythe-Jones. Carlos nodded curtly, flung a command to his riders and loosed the grey's reins. In a dust cloud, they clattered down the street.

"And now," said the Englishman brightly, "I have to seek my mount. The stage leaves at noon, does it not?"

"Say," challenged a wiry rider, "there ain't a hoss west of Kansas City kin pace thet grey!"

"Indeed!" returned Smythe-Jones politely.

II

DROWSY Cactus was stirred into vibrant life on the day of the race. From sunup, wagons, buckboards and buggies jounced in from every corner of the Valley. Carlos Compana, resplendent in scarlet sash, yellow silk shirt and sparkling conchas, jogged in, tailed by six black-sombreroed *vaqueros.*

A contingent from the CCC, a dozen strong, thundered in behind Tim Coghlan. Sheriff Harris' alert grey eyes narrowed when he noted they toted saddle guns and side arms.

But no sign of Smythe-Jones!

Then a strange creature materialized

out of the dust cloud that draped Main Street. It was a huge, ungainly animal, and perched high upon its hump was Smythe-Jones, in puncher's garb.

"Thet's a camel!" chuckled Harris. "And now fer hell with the lid off!"

The sheriff's prediction was quickly fulfilled. At scent of the strange beast, the long lines of tied cow ponies suddenly went beserk. Bridles were wrenched off, lines snapped, one section of the rail broke clean away, as a score of ponies bolted frantically. Yelling punchers added to the uproar.

In a flurry of arms and legs, the two passengers were projected into the air (CHAP. I)

When the dust finally thinned, Main Street was clear of horseflesh, while smiling cherubically, Smythe-Jones still sat atop the camel's hump.

Dan Harris thrust through the throng.

"Why, in the name of hallelujah, did yuh fork thet hunk of hell inter town?" he demanded.

"My entry!" smiled the Englishman.

Carlos wedged forward.

"What ees thees—a treek?" he barked.

Smythe-Jones slid out of the lofty saddle. "My dear boy!" he expostulated. "Surely you recollect our wager. I agreed to produce an animal that would outrun your grey over a hundred-mile course. This"—he patted the camel's matted coat—"is the animal. Now, shall we start?"

Carlos swung hotly to the sheriff. "The race, eet weel not be run. That is no hoss."

Amusement in his grey eyes, Harris pulled the agreement out of a pocket.

Loudly he read, " 'I will produce an animal to outrun said stallion.' " He eyed the camel. "Reckon thet's an animal."

"Put up or shet up, Carlos!" taunted Tim Coghlan, easing his holster forward.

Black-browed, the OOO boss eyed the ominous bunch of CCC riders.

"I weel ride," he said thickly.

Harris motioned the Englishman forward. "Lissen! You hit the wagon road south. Head east on the Silver City trail at Hangman's Oak. I gotta deputy stationed there. Report tuh Tom Morrell, town marshal at Silver City, and haid back. Take two trips. And you, Carlos, hightail ten minutes ahaid, tuh git away from the stink of thet doggoned camel."

In Cactus, betting became brisk. Few had ever before seen a camel, although a remnant of the animals were still to be found throughout the West, survivors of the herd imported by the government to pack supplies across the Arizona desert. Opinions as to the creature's speed and endurance were diverse. The majority were sceptical of the ungainly animal's chances against a fast pony. Unlike Smythe-Jones, they did not know camels. The CCC crew bet everything except their saddles.

It was past noon when the grey jogged into town. Fifteen minutes later, watered, coat glistening, it was headed south again. An hour later, the camel lumbered in. Symthe-Jones, dust-powdered, tied it in front of The Bull Pen and pushed inside.

"A bottle of cold beer and a sandwich," requested the Englishman. "I'll take it standing up."

A feminine shriek came from outside. Tim pushed his head through the batwings.

"Hyphen," he yelled, "yore doggoned camel's jest grabbed a bite tuh eat."

Smythe-Jones emptied his bottle of beer and joined the stream that eddied out of the saloon. A shapely young lady in calico, golden hair disheveled, stood with fire in her blue eyes. High above her head, the camel's wide mouth moved sluggishly as it munched contentedly upon a flower-bedecked bonnet. Every eye was on the camel, save the Englishman's. His rapt gaze was fastened upon the fair victim of the animal's appetite.

"Are you in trouble, madam?" he inquired politely.

"Do I look like it?" Mildred Kincaid snapped, fingering her disarranged hair. "And look at my bonnet, chewed up by that sickening beast!"

"Most unfortunate," murmured the Englishman. "I'll certainly replace the headpiece."

"You can't, I made it myself," she retorted. "Sat up to midnight last night, and now look at it! The animal has no more sense than you have—upsetting the town!" The hatless young lady turned her back upon him and tapped away down the plankwalk.

"Penelope," said Smythe-Jones sorrowfully, addressing the camel, "you have betrayed me!"

"Mister," threw in a voice from the chuckling onlookers, "you labeled him wrong. It ain't thet kind of a camel."

"Only a woman," returned the Englishman loftily, "could prove so false. And now for the trail. We have weary leagues before us."

NIGHT settled upon Cactus. The crowd thinned as wagons and buggies pulled out for home, but still men thronged the darkened plank walks. For the tenth time Tim Coghlan stepped outside The Bull Pen and gazed anxiously southward.

"Brazos Bill," a wizened old-timer from the CCC, leaned on the hitch-rail and expectorated idly in the direction of a cur slinking in the gutter. Suddenly, his gaze became fixed as he watched the animal. It froze, nose outstretched, and howled—a long, melancholy howl.

"We won, Tim!" he yelled. "Dawgs kin scent an Injun a mile off and thet camel stinks worse'n any Injun."

A huge shape padded silently and effortlessly through the shadows of Main Street, swung toward The Bull Pen, where exhilarated CCC punchers grabbed the weary Smythe-Jones and rushed him, shoulder high, into the saloon. They were still celebrating—and collecting bets—when the batwings were kicked back by a dark, lean figure, with a leveled six-gun in each hand.

" 'Ands up!"

The drone of talk snapped off as though severed with a blade. Smythe-Jones' languid drawl broke the spell.

Casually he stepped away from the bar, crunched across the sanded floor toward the challenger.

"Why the spectacular entry, old top?" he inquired. "Hide those lethal weapons and join the party. Mac, a bottle for our guest!"

Carlos' right-hand gun moved slightly. "Mebbe I come to keel you—*cochindlo!*" he croaked.

Smythe-Jones stopped. "Why should you kill me?"

"Why does the lion keel the coyote?"

"The matter of the grey, I presume?" pursued the Englishman.

Carlos bared white teeth. "El Rey will not carry a coyote, senor," he said, "because I weel keel you first." His left-hand gun slowly rose to the level of the dude's eyes.

The swinging doors bulged slowly inward. Perhaps Smythe-Jones sighted the intruder. Carlos did not. Yet some subtle change in the demeanor of the men massed in the background telegraphed a warning to the 'breed. Quick as a cat, he whirled—to face the sheriff's leveled gun.

"Drop thet hardware, Carlos!" Dan Harris' voice was quiet, but it held an edge of steel.

With a shrug, Carlos thrust his guns into their holsters and swung toward the bar. He grabbed a bottle and spilled bourbon into a glass. Raising it high, he shouted, "I dreenk to wan fine hoss—the best hoss in—in the world!"

The sheriff bellied up to the bar beside him. "I gotta hand it to yuh, Carlos. You shore nursed the grey along, ain't a spur scratch on him."

"El Rey, he never need the spur," replied the 'breed. He turned to Smythe-Jones. "You weel sell heem to me, yes? Wan thousand dollars!"

Smythe-Jones stared wonderingly at the pleading hatchet face. "You really must love that stallion if you could commit murder for him."

"I luv heem like a son, senor."

"Well, I can use the money," returned the other.

"*Gracias!*" breathed Carlo. "Now I weel not keel you." Again he raised his glass high. "I dreenk to the Senor Hyphen. May his herds increase."

"In order that there may be more steers to rustle," yawned the Englishman. "Well, we've had a great day!"

* * * * *

Tim Coghlan hit the dusty trail that snaked around the flanks of thirsty hills northward toward the Boxed B. There was no sign of life on the spread as Tim drew close, save for a bunch of ponies drifting around the pasture. He rode around to the rear of the house, swung out of the saddle and entered the patio, where his questing eyes sought June Boulderson in vain.

"Hello the house!" he bawled.

Bill Boulderson charged out, a jar of horse salve in one hand.

"Miss June around?" Tim inquired politely.

"She ain't got time for saddle stiffs." Boulderson and the CCC foreman had clashed before.

"I gotta see her—important," Tim urged.

"See heah," barked the Boxed B owner, pale eyes gleaming. "I don't stomach no thievin' CCC waddies on this spread, and ef any useless saddle pounders got notions of hangin' up their hats tuh my gal, they better git other ideas quick! I didn't edicate thet gal tuh throw herself away on no worthless cow nurse. She marries quality!"

"Sich as?" Tim's voice was dangerously quiet.

"Yore boss, or mebbe a banker or sichlike."

"You'd mary her off tuh Hyphen, 'cos he rods a spread? Hell, Bill, June ain't no steer, tuh be traded."

Boulderson stepped close, square jaw outthrust. "He's got savvy, and dinero. Didn't he hogswiggle Carlos Compana outta a thousand cartwheels?"

A clear feminine voice came from the house. "Please moderate your voice, Uncle. You don't have to reveal your matrimonial plans to the entire Valley."

June stepped out. "You'd better go, Bill—right now!" she said quietly.

"But I rode over tuh see yuh, special," he wailed.

"Please go!" she reiterated.

"But about thet buckboard," he babbled on. "I warn't really drunk. No siree! Thet Hyphen, he's a coyote in

sheep's pants, he—"

"I am not interested in your drunken escapades," she broke in icily. "Uncle, you had better step into the house and cool off."

WRATHFULLY, Tim watched the heavy-set Boulderson, June's willowy form beside him, disappear behind clustered roses. He spun around, fuming, and moved toward his pony.

Heading for the CCC, Tim was too preoccupied to give three approaching riders a thought. A yell from ahead jerked the foreman back to wakefulness. The three riders were plain now, hurtling toward him at breakneck speed.

Tim's pulse quickened. He recognized Carlos' big grey, stretched at an easy gallop, *vaqueros* on two smaller ponies quirting desperately to keep pace. Carlos pulled ahead. Tim drew rein, slipped his .45 out of leather, and waited.

"Buenos dias, Senor Teem!" yelled Carlos, quick eyes on the crooked gun arm. "I come in peace. We talk—yes?"

"I ain't in a talkin' mood," growled Tim.

"Then you weel listen—yes?" Carlos flashed white teeth in a quick smile.

"Spill it!" grunted Tim.

Carlos barked a single word: *"Vamos!"* His two swarthy retainers whirled their ponies and back-trailed. As their hoofbeats grew faint, the 'breed eased his mount ahead until he sat stirrup to stirrup with the wary-eyed CCC foreman.

"You weesh to marry the most beautiful senorita," he smiled, jerking his head in the general direction of the Boxed B. "And the Senor Boulderson, 'ee weeshes the senorita to marry wealth?"

"Bill make you a partner?" growled Tim.

The 'breed laughed at the baffled surprise in his eyes. "Eet ees known, Senor Teem. You are wan brave man, I am wan brave man." He spread his hands. "Why should we keel each other? I could show you how to win the most beautiful senorita. Eet ees so easy!"

"Figgered you was kinda sweet on June yoreself," countered Tim.

Carlos smiled. "Me, I love all the senoritas, like I love a beautiful hoss." He caressed the grey's long mane. "Why do we play with words? You weesh to marry the Senorita Boulderson?"

"Spread yore hand!"

"Thees Hyphen, you call heem, buy the CCC. 'Ee ees rich, so very rich! Eet ees a plaything. When 'ee tire 'ee ees gone—poof! Mebbe 'ee tire of you and you go—poof!" Carlos' voice dropped to a persuasive purr. "We two, we could work together. Eet ees so easy! You drift CCC steers to the west, into the hills. You lay off night guards. You tell Hyphen, 'Carlos ees an 'onest man, we do not need them.' The cows, they go—poof! We spleet feefty-feefty. Very soon you rich. Mebbe you buy the CCC. You marry your senorita. Eet ees so easy!"

"Ef you didn't double-cross me," grated Tim. "Did anyone ever tell yuh, Carlos," he inquired casually, "thet you're a prime skunk?"

The 'breed jerked erect. His gloved right hand dove for an ivory-butted gun, but the CCC foreman was faster. Before Carlos' long fingers tightened upon a yellowed gun butt, Tim's iron flashed up and out.

"Wal?" he drawled, gun leveled. "Call yore dawgs off afore my thumb gits itchy."

The two *vaqueros* were idling down the trail. At Carlos' shouted summons they cantered up. One dabbed at a knife hilt at sight of the CCC foreman's pointing guns. Carlos cut his action short with a flow of fluent Spanish. The pair roweled their ponies and hit northward.

Carlos kneed the grey around. *"Adios, senor!* You are wan beeg fool!" With this parting shot, he shook the grey into a canter and drummed in the wake of his retainers.

III

TRAILING his reins, Carlos knuckled the door of the Boxed B ranchhouse. Bill Boulderson opened it and glared at his visitor's suave, smiling features.

"My gal she ain't around," he spluttered. "And who in hell asked you tuh come acallin'?"

"Eet ees not the most beautiful

señorita I weesh to see," murmured the 'breed. "Eeet ees you, Senor Boulderson. I am wan good fren," he smiled. "I ride across CCC range and I see the buzzards feasting on senor's cows, fine beeg cows, and the leetle calves branded CCC."

"You're a doggoned liar!" exploded Boulderson.

The expression upon Carlos' features changed not one whit. "Thees Teem, 'ee ees a dark hoss, as you call heem. 'Ee ees hungry for cows. If the senor doubts my word, let heem ride, and 'ee weel see. *Buenas noches!*"

Pale eyes puzzled, the cowman watched Carlos rejoin his *vaqueros,* followed the three as they headed eastward. Then he turned back into the house where "Lanky" Lansdale, the Boxed B foreman, was spreading his long arm over a rocker in the cool adobe living room. Boulderson relayed the 'breed's message.

"Don't lissen reasonable tuh me," Lanky remarked.

"Why, Uncle!" burst out June, who was lighting an oil lamp at a side table. "It's obviously a cock-and-bull story. Tim Coghlan isn't that kind of a man. This Carlos is just a troublemaker. Perhaps he killed the cows himself."

"You keep outta this!" roared Boulderson. "Ain't thet Irish hellion been grabbin' my range? Don't he work on a percentage? Every CCC steer shipped drops four-five dollars into his jeans."

"But, Uncle!" June spread her slim hands.

"Fer gosh sakes, quit hornin' in, gal!" snapped the cowman. He swung to Lanky. "Wal?"

"Wal," drawled the foreman, "we could take a looksee."

At dawn, Boulderson and Lanky headed southward toward the CCC. The two pulled out of the valley and wound between curving hills. Bunched steers, carrying the Boxed B stamp brand, stared at them stupidly from a draw. Still the pair held southward at a steady jog trot.

Lanky touched his boss on the arm, pointed. Black buzzards were circling sluggishly above a ravine. Boulderson kneed his pony, angled off through the mesquite, Lanky tailing him. A quick exclamation dropped from the cowman's lips. The brush was flattened by the sprawled bulk of a cow, her head was smashed by bullets and a Boxed B brand plain upon her flank. Beside the body stood a bawling calf. On the rump of the calf a crude CCC had been burnt with a running iron, the scar still raw.

"Lousy rattlesnakes!" choked Boulderson, his bull neck reddening.

They found three more slaughtered Boxed B cows—and three misbranded calves.

"Reckon we report this tuh the sheriff," commented Lanky.

"Like hell!" raved his boss. "I'll handle this my own way. This is Tim Coghlan's work, the Siwash! He was riled on account I hazed him away from June. Wal, ef the CCC wants trouble, they kin shore have it. Now lissen!"

* * * * *

It was midafternoon when the clatter of a pony's hoofs was heard on the hard earth of the CCC yard. Tim rose and glanced out of the ranchhouse window. Brazos was legging toward the house as fast as his bowed legs would allow.

"Bill Boulderson's fencin' off Willow Spring!" he announced breathlessly.

Smythe-Jones nodded pleasantly. The news meant nothing to him. But Tim ripped out an oath.

"The danged old catamount! He gone loco?"

"He done gathered a fence gang, chuck wagon, posts and wire complete —and he grabbed the spring."

"Is this serious?" The Englishman's attention quickened.

"Serious? Hell, it's plumb murder!" shot back Tim. "Water's gold in these hills. Willow Spring's on our range—we need it tuh water our stock. Anyways, Bill knows yuh can't fence a spring."

The Englishman rose. "I suggest we look the situation over. Friend Boulderson is apparently an opportunist. Perhaps we could exercise a little strategy."

"Say, boss," rumbled Brazos, "ef words was bullets you'd be the slickest gunhand in Antelope. Bill ain't talkin'

any, but his boys tote Winchesters, and slugs is a mighty powerful argyment."

BELLYS flat beneath a clump of mountain sumac, the three CCC men eyed Willow Spring from a high bench. Below them, in a narrow valley, the spring seeped out of the hillside into a deep pool, shaded by willows. From the lower end of the pool, the rambling course of its overflow was marked by patches of rank grass, verdant green against the dun flat. South of the spring, in the neck of the valley, thirsty CCC steers were bunched thick, held by two riders. Behind these guards men were digging a line of fence posts across the valley.

A chuck wagon was drawn up nearby. Rolls of barbed wire glistened on the ground beside it. In pairs, men toted heavy fence posts from a stack dumped near by, and tamped them into position.

"I'll be double-damned!" muttered Tim. "Look at them cow critters, half-crazed with thirst, and thet low-down, sheepherdin' lobo is fencin' them away from their own water. Bill's either spoilin' fer a showdown or he's jest plain crazy!"

More CCC cows were filing in every minute, to add to the herd packed into the upper end of the valley. As the press of cows from behind increased, the bellowing herd threatened to break through. Two more riders hit leather and rode up.

"Bill's shore got one hell of a job holdin' 'em," announced Brazos. "Ef them cows stampede, he's in a jackpot. They'll tromp every doggoned jasper who don't streak outta there as flat as a shinplaster."

Smythe-Jones eyed his foreman's brooding features quizzically. "What action, if any, do you propose to take?"

"Hell, what action kin I take except gather the boys and blast them bustards off'n our range?"

"Exactly what our friend Boulderson anticipates," murmured Smythe-Jones. "Never do the obvious, old chap. Besides, an attack would be quite a sanguinary affair."

"You sed it!" Tim agreed.

"This is obviously illegal. Perhaps we should enlist the aid of the sheriff?"

"We kill our own rattlesnakes," shot back Tim curtly.

Again Smythe-Jones studied the scene below. "Will they complete the fence today?" he asked.

"I guess not." Tim studied the Boxed B workers. "They won't git through with the posts afore sundown. Reckon they'll string the wire at sunup."

"Ah, that affords us an opportunity to execute a strategic move!"

For some minutes Smythe-Jones discoursed eloquently. Slowly, the expression upon his companions' faces changed. Doubt gave way to interest, interest to dawning enthusiasm.

"Kin yuh beat it!" chuckled Brazos as the Englishman concluded. "Say, boss, I figured yore conk warn't much use, except tuh carry a lid, but, dammit, I ain't makin' no sich mistake agen!"

Smythe-Jones smiled modestly.

* * * * *

A full moon floated high over Willow Spring, flooding the narrow valley with soft radiance and peopling the slopes with creeping shadows. Down the steep slopes men dropped silently toward the sleeping Boxed B camp, slipping from shadow to shadow.

In their forefront, Tim Coghlan stopped within gunshot of the spring and fished a watch from his pants pocket. He eyed its face.

"Bed down, you jaspers," he urged. "Hyphen ain't due fer an hour yet."

Later, half-dozing against a tree trunk, Tim abruptly jerked back into alert wakefulness. Quickly, his gaze traveled around. Dark blotches against the night, his crew bunched close. Below, the Boxed B wagon showed plain beside the still willows. The campfire was dead. Up valley, the two night guards had halted their ponies and sat still as statues.

Then Tim grasped the reason for his sudden awakening—the steers had ceased their bellowing. Every cow critter stood silent, head up, sniffing the air, facing away from water.

Rigid with anticipation, the CCC foreman watched. Intuition told him that these steers were ready to stampede.

As one, the bunched herd whirled. Too late, the night herders sprang to life,

yelling and waving their Stetsons in a frenzy of desperation. A thousand sharp hoofs pawed the ground, the cows poured down valley in an irresistible brown flood, tails up and spread horns clashing. Helpless as chips in a raging torrent, the guards were engulfed.

On his feet now, Tim saw one pony rear high before it was swept away. In a desperate bid for life, its rider jumped for the back of one of the steers streaming wildly past. For brief moments he was tossed around, then he, too, went down beneath the swift avalanche of hoofs.

The leaders of the thundering stream of panicked steers were halfway down the valley, now. Below them, the slumbering camp awoke to bewildered life. A sprinkling of punchers threw themselves upon bare-backed ponies, but the majority scrambled up the steep slopes on either side. Then the stampeding cows were upon the camp and over it, charging blindly through all obstacles. The wagon crashed, wheels spinning.

A yell from an excited puncher beside him jerked Tim's gaze up valley. At the tail of the plunging herd raced a strange creature. High upon its hump perched a white-shrouded figure, ghostly in the moonlight.

The thunder of hoofs died as the last of the steers swept out of sight. The camel slowed, came to a stop amid the debris of the wrecked Boxed B camp. The floating dust slowly settled and peace again descended upon Willow Spring.

With triumphant yells, the CCC punchers cascaded down the hillside, surrounded the sheeted Smythe-Jones as he dropped to the ground.

"Well, well!" he observed. "My stratagem proved quite effective. We achieved a bloodless victory, and those brutes certainly wrecked friend Boulderson's camp."

"Reckon thet'll holt Bill fer a while, but it warn't what yuh might call bloodless," returned Tim grimly. "Two night guards went down—didn't hev no more chance than snowballs in hell. And mebbe more Boxed B boys didn't git clear. They shore won't ferget Willow Spring."

THE STORY of Boulderson's abortive raid upon CCC water had percolated through the Valley and lost nothing in the telling. The Englishman's success in hogswiggling the wily Carlos, too, was still fresh in mind. Antelope Valley denizens were awakening to the fact that the gangling Limejuicer was not the jackass he would have men think.

When a few days later he padded into Cactus atop his camel and tied the beast outside The Bull Pen, Smythe-Jones glanced negligently up and down the street, with the vain hope of sighting Mildred Kincaid.

"Say," drawled a weathered puncher, "thet critter got a handle?"

"A handle?" Smythe-Jones' lofty forehead puckered. "Oh, yes. Her name is Penelope. Rather appropriate, don't you think?"

"Thet ain't no lady!" accused another puncher, after a critical inspection of the beast.

Dan Harris strolled up.

"Hey, Dan," bawled an onlooker, "is thet hunk of stink and fur a he or a she?"

The sheriff walked around the slobbering animal. "It shore ain't no lady," he declared.

Smythe-Jones smiled. "Penelope will vindicate herself," he declared solemnly. "She is due to calve, or perhaps conceive would be the correct word, within the week."

Again Dan Harris rounded the bulky creature.

"Limey, ef thet critter ever calves, it'll shore be a miracle."

"I have twenty dollars to back my belief," replied the Englishman blandly.

"It's a bet!" snapped the sheriff. "We'll hev Mac, inside, holt the stakes."

"I'll lay ten iron men," threw in the doubting puncher.

"Put me down fer twenty!" yelled another.

Smythe-Jones pulled out a notebook and pencil. "Let me see . . . the sheriff, twenty dollars. And your . . . er . . . handle, sir? Thank you! Twenty dollars. Ten dollars over there, I believe." He glanced around. "I am still solvent. Any further wagers, gentlemen?"

In a few minutes the page was full and the group adjourned to The Bull

Pen to wet their whistles and deposit stakes with Mac, the saloonkeeper.

* * * * *

Tim Coghlan, meanwhile, was heading through the hills toward Willow Spring. Boulderson had made no further gesture since the ill-fated stampede but, knowing the pugnacious cowman, the CCC foreman was determined to check up.

He jogged into the narrow valley. No sign of the fracas was visible save the wrecked wagon and a charred heap of fence posts. Cows stood hock-deep in the pool as Tim drew rein, fumbled for the makin's.

With a vicious drone, a bullet fanned his cheek. Before the report hit his ears he was half out of the saddle, diving for a nearby boulder. Another slug dusted him as he rolled over and over, gained the shelter of the outjutting rock and lay flat, panting. There was no sign of his assailant.

For long minutes the foreman lay motionless, listening. Then, beyond the spring, he heard the snapping of sticks. Something was pushing through the brush. The thud of hoofs folowed as a racing pony hit the trail.

Tim jumped for his roan, urged the pony forward. The animal swept along the curving trail between the ridges. An abrupt jerk and the rider was flung through the air. Instinctively, he balled, hit the sun-dried earth, somersaulted twice and lay helpless—half-stunned and breathless. Behind him, the roan struggled to its feet and stood trembling.

His head in a whirl, the CCC foreman swayed to his feet. A bitter curse escaped him as he glimpsed a rope, stretched taut, knee high above the trail, ends knotted around two tree trunks.

Tim pulled himself into the saddle. At a walk, he moved down trail, then worked the roan up to a gallop, hitting northward. Only one ranch lay that way —the Boxed B.

Lanky Lansdale was perched on the top rail of the corral when Tim rode into Boulderson's spread. "Bill around?" queried the CCC foreman.

"Nope—in town," returned Lanky. He eyed Tim curiously, but said nothing.

"Some yellow-bellied bushwhacker took a shot at me, and I've a notion he hailed from the Boxed B. You been ridin'?"

Lanky shook his head. "The Boxed B don't fight thataways, Tim," he said reprovingly. "And you should know it. The old man's in town with June. Crew's out on the range." He jerked his head toward the fenced pasture. "Take a looksee at the saddle stock—ain't a pony sweated."

Tim eyed him closely. "So long!" he said.

HE HEADED back for Willow Spring. The trip rope was still stretched across the trail. Tim untied it, coiled it carefully and hung it upon his saddlehorn. One other ranch the bushwhacker could have hailed from—the OOO, westward, on the fringe of the Bad Lands. Again Tim forked the roan and rode into the now setting sun.

For an hour he worked westward. Suddenly, his attention quickened. Ahead a campfire glowed through a growth of balsam in a draw. Tim drifted forward.

A quarter mile from the flickering fire he dismounted, tied his pony in a clump of brush and unstrapped his spurs. Then he Injuned forward through the gloaming. This was Carlos' country and he was taking no more chances.

Silently, he slid between tree trunks toward the firelight. The flames revealed a rude log shack, set back in the draw. Beside it, two ponies moved restlessly in a pole corral. Around the fire, the riders jabbered in Spanish. The light glinted upon their swarthy faces.

Coghlan worked steadily around to the corral. Two saddles were racked on the fence, by the gate. The foreman crept closer, fingered a coil of rope on one saddle. Then he gave his attention to the other. The rope was missing!

Twenty paces away, through the trees, two *vaqueros* settled down to a meal. Tim felt for the butt of his gun. Lips tight, he cat-toed toward them.

"Stretch!"

Gun leveled, Tim stepped into the light. The shorter of the two *vaqueros*, a pock-marked, heavy-shouldered fel-

low, checked a swift imprecation.

"One of you gents lost a rope?" inquired the CCC foreman affably.

Neither Mexican spoke.

"Playin' dumb, eh? Wal, unbuckle them gunbelts and sling them out in front, afore I shoot 'em off. You, Shorty, fust!"

Tim thumbed back the hammer of his .45 as, sullenly, the two tossed the belts toward him. The CCC man moved forward, grabbed the shorter Mexican's gunbelt with his left hand, yanked a heavy Colt from the holster. Slipping his own gun into leather, he broke the Colt. His head dropped as though to examine the cylinder.

The pock-marked rider's right hand silently dropped behind his neck. Swift as a striking rattler, he jerked out a blade. His wrist flicked back and the silver of steel hissed through the still night air.

Eyes shadowed by the brim of his Stetson, Tim watched the Mexican's every move, although his head was bent toward the gun in his hands. He ducked sideways as the knife streaked toward him. It flashed past, struck the door of the shack.

The Colt dropped from the foreman's hand as he dabbed for his own iron. He whipped it up and out. Twice the weapon blared, spurting death. The pock-marked *vaquero* crashed down, then was still.

Tim reholstered his smoking iron, retrieved the gun he had dropped.

"Two empties!" muttered the foreman. "I scotched the right snake." His head came up. "You gotta rope?" he demanded of the surviving *vaquero.*

"Si, senor!"

"Keeno! Rope thet coyote to his saddle and beat it. Tell Carlos thet's how the CCC handles bushwhacking bustards."

Tim held the restless pony while the *vaquero* lashed his companion's body in place. The Mexican hastily cinched the saddle upon his own pony and led the animal from the corral. Nervously, he accepted the reins of the led pony. With a muttered "Gracias!" he set spurs to his mount and in a moment had disappeared into the darkness with his gruesome load.

IV

SHERIFF HARRIS, sitting in the creaky swivel chair of his office, revolved the problem of Smythe-Jones in his mind. The stage had already carried a letter to the fond parent in England, requesting more definite information about her son's appearance, date of sailing, and actions since landing in the United States. True, telegraph and cable would have speeded an answer, but proof of criminal intent on the part of the erratic Englishman was lacking, and the sheriff was conscious of a friendly feeling toward the fellow.

Anyway, he mused, fourflusher or not, Smythe-Jones could be picked up any time as long as he remained in Antelope Valley, and he appeared to be firmly welded to the CCC.

Quick, impatient steps on the gravel outside broke in upon Harris' cogitations. The door banged open and Bill Boulderson, pale eyes sparkling excitement, stormed in. Boulderson had himself been a sheriff in Texas before settling in Antelope Valley. There was little love lost between the two men.

"Lemme see them reward dodgers," jerked out the visitor, without preamble.

"You roddin' the law agen, Bill?" inquired Harris equably.

"Nope! But I kin collect a reward ef I sick you onto a wanted man, and I jest lamped one in The Bull Pen. Lemme see them dodgers!"

Harris dropped a thick wad of yellowing sheets on the desk top. The ex-sheriff thumbed through the stack.

"There's the jasper!" ejaculated Boulderson in triumph. "Five hundred dollars, dead or alive, and the bustard's swillin' booze in The Bull Pen, right now!"

Harris examined the rough reproduction. He glanced at the date on the dodger.

"Ten years old, Bill," he commented.

"Mebbe," grated Boulderson, "but the hairpin's wanted fer murder—Abilene, Texas. The charge still stands, and I git the bounty. I laid the finger on the bustard! Now you take him!"

The sheriff rose, reached for his gunbelt. "Since you collect the blood

money," he observed ironically, "string along. A fellow kin change plenty in ten years. Mebbe you mistook the brand."

"With a scar over his left eyebrow!" snorted Boulderson. "I'll side yuh and I'll slip a slug inter the jasper ef he gits rambunctious."

"Pull thet gun," promised Harris, "and I'll knock yuh cold. Yuh ain't sheriff of Antelope Valley—yet!"

Outside The Bull Pen, Boulderson pointed through the dusty window. A knot of punchers bunched at the far end of the bar. Midway, a lone rider in patched shirt and denims was sipping his drink, boot hooked on the rail.

"Thet's the jasper," growled the ex-sheriff. "Yuh could cut him down from the batwings. He's wuth as much dead as alive."

Harris pushed inside. As his boots crunched across the sanded floor, the stranger's head jerked up. He glimpsed the sheriff's star in the long mirror behind the bar, whirled and dropped into a crouch, fingers closing on his gun butt. But before the weapon cleared leather, Harris' iron flashed out.

"Hold it, *amigo!*" he warned.

The stranger's hand dropped from his gun and he slowly straightened. Harris noted a blue scar upon his forehead. Still covering his quarry, the sheriff stepped close. With his free hand, he lifted the other's gun from the holster and thrust it beneath his waistband.

"Whar d'ye hail from?" he inquired.

"Drifted up from Arizona."

" 'Member pluggin' a gent in Abilene, Texas, ten summers back?"

The stranger grinned crookedly. "Reckon you hit the bull's-eye, Sheriff. I figgered I lived thet down. Wal, heah's how!"

He lifted his half-empty glass and tilted back his head. Then with a swift sweep of the arm, he flung the bourbon at the sheriff's face.

But Dan Harris was wise to the ways of wanted men. He ducked, then shot out his foot as the stranger scuttled for the door. The fugitive sprawled headlong. With a wry grin, he slowly pulled himself off the sanded floor, beneath the threat of the sheriff's gun.

"Another break like thet," promised Harris, "and I'll feed yuh a lead pill. Git goin'!"

The sheriff's gun nudging his shoulder blades, the prisoner strode soberly toward the batwings. When they reached the sheriff's office, Harris picked up the reward notice, still lying on his desk.

" 'Wanted, Dead or Alive—William Hargreaves," he read aloud. "Height 5'11". Weight 150. Age 20. Brown hair and eyes. Bullet scar left temple. For murder of Jules Finch, in the Topaz Saloon, Abilene, Texas, June 13th, 1869.' Thet you?" he queried sharply.

Hargreaves nodded. "Age shoulda been eighteen, and it warn't murder," he commented.

The sheriff eyed the prisoner curiously.

"How come you got in this jam?" he asked.

"Drifted inter Abilene with a trail herd. Finch was a tinhorn gambler who rooked me with marked cards and pulled a hideaway when I called him. So I let him have it. His brother was a deputy —I was a kid and a stranger. So I beat it, *pronto*. Guess thet gink who trailed you in recognized me. He was sheriff."

Harris eyed the fellow thoughtfully. Most cowtown juries would have exonerated him. It was no crime to shoot a man in fair fight. He rose, lifted a bunch of keys from a desk drawer.

"Wal, I gotta commit yuh. My deputy, name of 'Pache, 'll bring in supper. Mighty careless hombre, 'Pache. I've warned him a dozen times not tuh pack an iron inter the cells. Some day a nervy jasper's goin' tuh grab it. I'll loose yore pony in the livery corral—at sunup."

CACTUS slept, except for celebrants in The Bull Pen, when 'Pache yanked open the heavy plank door of the adobe jail. A heavy gun hung at his side.

"Hey!" he grunted, holding out a tray with both hands. "Yore chuck!"

Hargreaves rose, approached the squat 'Pache. With a quick gesture, he jerked the deputy's gun from leather. Chuckling, he stepped briskly outside and slammed the cell door, which locked with a click. He dropped the keys outside and laid the gun carefully beside them. Then, with a careless gesture of

farewell, he headed for the open.

'Pache rolled a smoke, relaxed upon the bunk. When the cylinder of tobacco had smoldered down to a butt, he negligently rattled the cell door and yelled blue murder. . . .

While Bill Hargreaves headed deep into the Bad Lands, Smythe-Jones swayed sedately toward town atop a camel. At its heels trotted an awkward, spindly-legged caricature of a colt, with its mother's big slobbering mouth and liquid eyes. The Englishman's face bore such a contented smile that he might well have been the proud father.

The appearance of the trio upon the main street of peaceful Cactus created a furor. A crowd quickly gathered as Smythe-Jones tied his steed and patted it affectionately.

"Don't crowd Penelope, gentlemen!" requested the Englishman. "Remember, she's a mother! And now that I have adduced tangible evidence of her sex, perhaps we should adjourn to yonder hostelry and make our settlements. The drinks are on me!"

Mac passed out bottles, and disgruntled citizens aligned themselves along the bar. The saloonkeeper brought a canvas sack of coin from a back room and plunked it on the mahogany. Smythe-Jones produced his pocketbook and eyed the list of wagers.

"First we have Sheriff Harris," he announced. "Twenty dollars. Ah, our friend the sheriff is absent, doubtless pursuing a malefactor."

"You kin lay yore wad he's chasin' a malefactor," came a dry voice from the batwings, "and he's done caught up with the coyote."

The Englishman's mien changed not one whit.

"This is no time for humor, my dear sheriff," he retorted severely. "A financial transaction of some size is about to take place. You doubtless observed that Penelope has assumed the sacred responsibilities of motherhood."

Humor glinted in Harris' eyes as he sauntered up.

"Limey," he said, "yore a doggoned fourflusher, and I ain't shore but thet we oughta string you up! You gambled thet Penelope, as you miscalled yore hunk of stink, would calf. Wal, he ain't calfed—and you pay off!"

"But, my dear fellow, the evidence is before you," expostulated Smythe-Jones. He gestured toward the two beasts outside.

"Shore," grated Harris. "Two humps, but I don't see no Penelope. When I placed my bet I branded Penelope—with a cigarette. Thet critter spittin' on the hitch-rail don't carry my brand. You switched camels, you dogblasted sheepherder!"

The slow-spoken accusation brought an ominous growl from the absorbed onlookers. Smythe-Jones glimpsed a vista of hard, scowling faces. He glanced apprehensively around.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, "I am sure men of your intelligence will not be mislead by such a fantastic story. Shame upon a man who would slander a lady, with a newborn babe at her heels. But I will be generous." He waved slender fingers toward the money sack. "All bets are off. I cannot allow Penelope to wilt beneath the foul breath of suspicion. Let us drink to Penelope Junior—the pride of Antelope Valley."

His oratorical effort was received with blank silence. The sheriff shook his head.

"Nope, Limey, yuh cain't wiggle out thataways. You're guilty of hogswiggling with criminal intent, likewise robbin' citizens of Cactus with malice aforethought. We strung up the last jasper who tried thet in Antelope Valley."

A DIVERSION drew attention to the batwings. Tim Coghlan and a handful of CCC punchers erupted into the saloon. They seemed to be nursing a secret joke. Harris advanced to meet the newcomers.

"Mister Coghlan!" The sheriff's voice was grave and his left eyelid, hidden from the Englishman, descended significantly. "Yore boss is in one hell of a spot. He done switched camels on us with criminal intent. Right now, I am about to appoint a jury tuh decide whether we jug him tuh stand trial afore Judge McCloud, or save the taxpayers' money and hang the hairpin right now. We ain't had a good hangin' fer a month!"

"Cut the palaver and string the coy-

ote up!" growled an expectant Boxed B waddie.

"Suits me," agreed the sheriff. "Go git yore rope!"

Thoroughly alarmed, Smythe-Jones pushed forward and appealed to the chunky Tim. "I say, old boy, lend a hand! Did you ever hear the like? An officer of the law advocating lynching! My word, the whole thing is monstrous!"

Tim slowly shook his head. "Lady Luck shore dealt yuh a bum hand, Hyphen. Dan's the law around heah and what he sez goes."

The Boxed B rider returned with a coiled rope. Harris eyed it critically, then measured the uneasy Englishman's form with appraising eyes. "Reckon, thet'll carry his weight. Wal, le's git the job over with!"

He grabbed Smythe-Jones' right arm. A husky townsman fastened on the other.

"You got any last words?" inquired the sheriff gruffly.

Rising anger drowned the Englishman's apprehensions. "Last words!" he snapped. "None, except that you are a pack of wolves, totally unable to appreciate a joke. Where is your boasted American justice? To hang a man because of an innocent prank! Bah, you sicken me!"

"Boys!" exclaimed Dan Harris in wonderment, "he was jest funnin'. Wal, why didn't yuh put us wise, Limey? This calls fer a vote. All them in favor of hangin' the Limey shout 'Aye.' "

A thunderous roar rattled the bottles on the shelves.

"And all them in favor of givin' the jasper one more chance shout 'No.' "

Complete silence clothed the saloon.

"The 'No's' have it," announced Harris, with a straight face. "Set 'em up, Mac!"

* * * * *

The following morning found Smythe-Jones back in Cactus. Harris' office was empty. Smythe-Jones wandered down to The Bull Pen. Two riders, drinking beer at a table, chuckled when he entered. Mac slid a bottle before him, then dipped beneath the bar.

"Dan said tuh hand over yore stake money." He dropped a clinking sack before the Englishman.

For once Smythe-Jones was taken aback. "But . . . er," he stammered, "I understood it was forfeited—feelings were aroused, doncher know."

Mac wagged his head ponderously. "Dan said all bets are off—and what Dan sez goes. You mighty near got by with thet ringer, but yuh shore gotta get up early tuh hogswiggle Dan."

"I heartily agree." There was a fervent note in the Englishman's voice. "A canny boy, your sheriff. And quite fair-minded."

"Now, don't butter me, Limey. I may hev tuh hang yuh yet."

Dan Harris' even tones at his shoulder brought Smythe-Jones around with a start of surprise. His lips quirked.

"Dear me, Sheriff, you have a habit of appearing at the most disconcerting moments." He held up the sack of dollars. "It's really jolly decent of you to return these."

"It's yores," grunted Harris. "Now lissen! I jugged one of Carlos' greasers last night, drunk. He spilled plenty. 'Pears Carlos used a runnin' iron on a passel of Bill Boulderson's calves. Branded 'em CCC. Mebbe the Mexican is stirring up trouble. Pass the word to Tim tuh keep his peepers peeled and his temper bridled. Bill's as techy as a treed cat and ef the two git together there'll likely be trouble. I don't hanker fer a range war."

"Indeed no!" agreed the Englishman heartily. "Tim's matrimonial prospects would be completely blighted. Well, gentlemen, I bid you good day!"

It was noon when the Englishman rode into the CCC. He found Tim in the blacksmith shop, tacking on a shoe. The foreman continued driving nails while Smythe-Jones relayed the sheriff's message.

"So thet's why Bill grabbed our water!" Tim tapped the last nail into place and dropped the hoof. "Git it? The old catamount figgered we misbranded his calves—and he hit back, whar it hurt. Doggone thet damned dago!"

The CCC foreman considered for a moment, frowning, then he slipped off the blacksmith's apron. "Reckon I'll

ride over and palaver with Bill. Ef the two spreads lock horns, Carlos 'll run stuff off in chunks."

AGAIN Tim hit the familiar trail north. At Willow Spring a mule nuzzled the luxurious grass. A droning voice reached the rider's ears from the shadow of the willows. Peering through the drooping branches, he glimpsed the shabby form of Peter the Preacher.

Iron-grey hair awry, lined face uplifted and gaunt arms stretched appealingly toward the heavens, the evangelist prayed fervently. Tears glistened upon his furrowed cheeks, his high-pitched voice shook with emotion. At his feet, a big Bible lay on the turf. Unaware of the curious onlooker, he continued his exhortations, his spare form quivering with earnestness.

"Rastling with the devil!" Tim told the roan in an awed voice as he drifted away into the shallow valley in the center of which lay the Boxed B.

Tim dogged down the valley. To his right, the tree-lined arroyo that cut behind the ranchhouse gashed the valley. Movement beneath the cottonwoods on the edge of the arroyo drew his attention. He caught the flash of a rider dropping out of sight. The CCC foreman would have dismissed the incident without further thought, but the stranger forked a grey. Instantly, Carlos came to mind. Was the Mexican skulking around the Boxed B? And if so, why?

A dusky 'breed was breaking ponies in the corral when Tim rode in. Lanky Lansdale, perched on the top rail, watched with tired eyes.

"Tickle 'er feet!" yelled Tim.

Lanky raised an arm in lazy greeting. Tim jogged past, rounded the house, dismounted outside the patio in the rear.

No one appeared to be around. Boulderson's office was located in one of the wings that dropped back to side the patio. Tim moved toward the open window to ascertain if the Boxed B boss was inside. It was smothered with wild roses. A girl's voice, shrill and hysterical, hit his ears.

His pace quickened, then he stopped, forehead creased with perplexity. It was not, as he first thought, June Boulderson. Mildred Kincaid was inside, hurling accusations. The foreman heard the deep drone of Boulderson's voice. Again the girl cut in with angry denunciation.

Uncertainly, Tim turned away. This was not intended for his ears. Again the girl's voice rose high. There came a loud bellow from Boulderson, the roar of a gun, a scream—and silence.

For an instant, Tim stood petrified. Then he came to life, plunged toward the house, ran through the open back door, thudded down a corridor and charged into the office. On the carpet, by the desk, bulked the Boxed B owner's form. He lay on his side, his grey shirt open, and the black hair upon his chest was matted with fresh blood.

The girl, with bloodless face and dilated eyes, was standing stiffly by the side window. A stubby derringer was gripped tightly in her right hand.

The foreman cleared his throat with embarrassment. "You plugged Bill, ma'am?" It was a fool question, but he could think of nothing else to say.

Mildred Kincaid nodded. "He deserved it, the brute!"

Her voice was tired, lifeless. She swayed; the gun slipped from her fingers. Tim sprang across the carpet, caught her and eased her into a chair.

Spurs jingled outside and Lanky peered from the doorway. "Coulda sworn I heard a shot—" he began, then sighted the bloodied body. "B'gawd, it's Bill!"

Supporting Mildred Kincaid in the chair, Tim nodded. "Ain't there a wimman around?" he demanded.

"Nope!" Lanky replied. "Miss June's out avisitin'. Her bedroom's acrost the way," he added absently.

Tim gathered the girl in his arms, carried her out of the room. When he returned, Lanky was rolling a smoke, somber eyes regarding the body.

"The gal plug Bill?" he inquired.

The CCC man nodded.

"Wotinell for?"

Tim gloomily fished out the makin's. "How in heck would I know? Heard the report from the yard and bulled in. There was the gal, holdin' the gun, and Bill was cold meat. Damned good shot!" he added irrelevantly.

"Wal, reckon this is a job fer Dan

Harris." Lanky said. "Guess I'll hev Cherokee hightail fer town."

V

THE PAIR were in the bunkhouse when Doc Morgan's buggy whirled into the yard. Beside him perched the lean figure of Sheriff Harris. The sheriff dropped down and the two foremen sauntered across the hoof-chopped yard toward him. Doc Morgan, black bag swinging from a chubby hand, stepped briskly into the office.

"Gimme the lowdown, *pronto,*" the sheriff said to Tim.

The CCC man told of his wait in the patio, the angry voices, the shot and his discovery.

"Wal, le's take a gander," suggested the sheriff.

The three headed for the house.

Doc Morgan was seated in a chair, lighting a cigar. Harris bent over the body. "What's the verdict, doc?"

"Don't fire fool questions," snapped the little medico. "You know perfectly well—gunshot wound, death instantaneous, perforated right ventricle of heart. No powder burns, so the shot must have been fired at least from the opposite side of the room."

Harris glanced around, sighted the .38 lying by the window. He picked the weapon up, examined the load.

"So she used this!" he commented. "Whar did yuh say she was?"

Tim led the way to the bedroom. Mildred Kincaid sat in the big rocker by a window. Her face was bloodless, but she appeared to be composed. She nodded recognition and smiled wearily.

"I've been waiting for a long time for you, Mr. Harris."

"You shot Bill Boulderson?" he asked gently.

She jerked her head in quick affirmation.

"Why?"

The girl sat silent, lips compressed.

"Self-defense, mebbe," he prompted. "Bill git rough?"

"No. I came here to kill him. I killed him because he deserved to die."

"Why?" persisted Harris.

"*That,* you'll never know!" she replied tersely.

The sheriff shrugged.

"Le's go, ma'am!"

Later, in the sheriff's office, a perplexed Harris held a confab with his deputies.

"What I cain't figger," he observed morosely, "is the motive. The gal's record is as clean as a laundered sheet and she got a preacher fer a father. Yet she rides hell fer leather to the Boxed B and plugs Bill. Why? I doubt she ever met the jasper afore."

"Ain't but one reason a gal like thet would blast a hombre like Boulderson," snapped 'Pache. "Bill made a pass at the filly."

Harris shook his head. "She shot him from across the room, and she warn't roughed up none. 'Sides, Tim claims the pair locked horns and argued aplenty. Thet don't square with promiscuous shootin'. Nope, Mildred Kincaid had good reason tuh beef Bill. Mebbe we kin git holt of Pete. Ef he cain't git her tuh spill the beans, no one can."

"Lamped the old catawampus yesterday, headin' fer the Smokies on thet hammerheaded mule," supplied Bull. "Reckon he was carrin' the gospel tuh the OOO. Thet gang of rustlers shore need it!"

Quick steps outside jerked their heads around. The door was abruptly thrown open and Smythe-Jones stepped in.

"I understand you have Miss Kincaid jailed?" he challenged.

The sheriff nodded.

"Has no one offered bail?"

"Reckon no one, outside of Lanky, Tim, you and Doc, knows she's jugged. It'll spread plenty fast."

"I wish to bail her out, immediately."

"Get holt of Jedge McCleod. The jedge sets the bail and signs the order." Harris turned to the squat deputy. "You show him, 'Pache."

The pair left the office. The sheriff glanced at Bull. "So the Limey fell fer the schoolmarm."

"Wal, he's a doggone good picker," grunted the deputy. "Ef she's a killer, I'm a Siwash."

"But dammit, she confessed!" exploded Harris.

He frowned as he built a smoke. He couldn't smother the insistent doubt arising in his own mind.

Again the door flew open and Smythe-Jones stalked in, followed by a panting 'Pache. The Englishman thrust a sheet of paper at the sheriff triumphantly.

"The formalities have been complied with. I may state, too, that the judge was incredulous. He avers that Miss Kincaid bears a most exemplary character."

"But she killed a man," grunted Harris. He fished in a desk drawer for his keys, pushed back his chair. "Wal, what the jedge says goes."

HE LED the way to the adobe jail in the rear of the courthouse, inserted a key and swung the heavy outside door open. Smythe-Jones' searching eyes focused upon the outline of a girlish form, seated upon a bunk in a steel-barred cell. She approached the bars as the two men drew near.

"The Limey here," Harris inclined his head toward the Englishman, "put up bail fer yore release. Reckon yuh kin step out, but stick around town." His keys jingled as he fitted the lock.

"Wait!" Her voice was insistent. "Mr. Smythe-Jones is very kind, but I prefer to remain here."

"But, Miss Kincaid," broke in the Englishman, "this is unthinkable! You don't belong in this hole. You couldn't have killed that Boulderson person. There is some horrible mistake."

The girl's white lips twitched. "I'm a killer, a cold-blooded killer. Now, go away!"

Dan Harris pulled the key from the lock. "Wal, Limey, thet's how it is!"

But the Englishman pressed close to the bars. "Miss Kincaid—Mildred!" he cried insistently. "Guilty or not guilty, you must allow me to help you."

Stifled sobbing from the gloom of the cell was the only response. A despondent Smythe-Jones pulled out for the CCC, while Harris returned to the little office to mull over the murder with his deputies.

An hour later, Doc Morgan, who had been performing his post-mortem, dropped in and pitched a stubby lead cylinder upon Harris' desk.

"The bullet," he explained crisply, "imbedded in a lumbar muscle. Good night, gentlemen!"

The sheriff picked up the hunk of lead, tossed it idly upon the palm of his hand, eyeing it with little curiosity. Suddenly, his body became rigid.

"Am I loco?" Unbelievingly, Harris extended his palm toward the others. "Take a gander at thet!"

"A forty-five slug," boomed Bull, leaning forward.

"Wal, warn't he plugged with a forty-five?" demanded 'Pache.

"Hell no!" Harris still stared at the bullet. "The gal toted a thirty-eight! Well, I guess we'll let her sweat it out," he decided.

"She done confessed. Either she figgers she beefed Bill, or she's coverin' up fer the killer. At sunup I'll mosey out tuh the Boxed B. I gotta give thet office the once-over. . . ."

The shadow of death still seemed to hover over the dead man's ranch when the sheriff jogged toward it across the shallow valley. Lanky emerged from a barn as Harris dismounted by the water trough.

"Anyone around?" inquired the lawman.

"Nope, I set the boys hazin' the stuff outta the hills. Nighthawks been plenty busy. Miss June's avisitin' up at the Lazy Y."

Harris nodded toward the corral. "Le's chin awhiles," he invited.

Perched on the top rail, the pair eyed the grey house.

"Anyone around yesterday, 'sides Tim?" inquired the sheriff, tapping tobacco into a paper.

"Cherokee was toppin' off colts."

"You lamp Miss Kincaid when she rode in?"

"Nope. Guess I was settin' on this heah rail, awatchin' Cherokee."

"How 'bout Tim Coghlan?"

"Yep, he circled round, yelled 'Tickle 'er toes!' and hit fer the house."

"Act ornery, like he was riled up?"

Lanky considered. "Nope!" he declared finally.

"But him and Bill locked horns frequent," prompted Harris.

The Boxed B foreman chuckled. "Wal, last time he rode in he was plumb wild-eyed, claimed a Boxed B bushwhacker was on his trail. Time afore thet, Bill tongue-lashed him aplenty. He pulled

out with blood in his eye and swore he'd let daylight inter the boss. But you know Tim!"

Harris slid to the ground. "Reckon I'll drift around. See yuh later."

He rounded the silent ranchhouse and stepped into the patio. To his right and left were the two wings of the house, each with a row of square windows cut into the thick adobe walls. The end room to his left would be Boulderson's office. One window overlooked the patio. It was barely visible through the massed shrubbery.

The sheriff left the graveled pathway and pushed through the bunched bushes. His head was bent as he eyed the ground for footprints. With growing excitement he sighted two depressions, one behind the other, which the boots of an assassin might well have made as he crouched outside the window. The sheriff bent lower, growled with exasperation. The killer—if it was the killer—had scuffed loose earth over the footprints.

Harris sank to his knees, carefully brushed the crumbling soil aside. Swore softly—the tracks were obliterated. On hands and knees he nosed around the bushes, found more tracks. Each had been carefully wiped out. One thing was sure: the death shot was fired by no panic-stricken novice.

FINALLY, the sheriff rose and dusted off his pants. Cogitating, he entered the house, walked down the passageway toward the office.

The sheriff stood by the doorway, reconstructing the killing in his mind: the girl stood by the open window, .38 in her hand, facing Boulderson, at the desk. She fired, and the Unknown behind her, outside the window, fired at the same moment. The Unknown blasted Boulderson, the girl's shot missed. Boulderson dropped. The girl screamed, figuring she had killed him. The Unknown slipped away.

It was a pretty theory, but how much truth did it hold? If he could locate the .38 slug now!

Harris dropped into the chair, jerked out the makin's and frowned at the ceiling. With a quick exclamation, he dropped his tobacco sack. Unheeded, the contents spilled brown over the carpet, while he crossed the room with quick, eager strides. He jumped up onto the desk top, fingered a deep scar in the ceiling above his head.

Quickly, he pulled out his barlow knife and dug into the adobe with its sharp point. The steel blade grated on metal. Eyes bright with anticipation, the sheriff dug deeper, pried a flattened hunk of ragged lead out of the brittle clay. Pocketing his knife, he eyed his find in triumph. It was Mildred Kincaid's bullet!

"Wal, thet clears the Kincaid gal," he murmured. "But she shore was in a killin' mood! Why?"

Bone-dry and spitting grit, the sheriff jogged into Cactus, tied outside The Bull Pen, entered and washed the trail dust out of his throat. 'Pache, drifting past on the plank walk, sighted Harris, pushed inside and joined the sheriff at the bar.

"Wal?" he inquired.

"Yuh kin spring the gal." Harris pushed the bottle toward his deputy. "She flung a slug at Bill—and hit the ceiling. Some slick gunnie plugged him from the open window behind her—and she never knew no different!"

"Yuh ain't tellin' me she never heard thet .45 ablastin' in her ear!" 'Pache's voice was derisive.

The sheriff nodded. "Shore! Mebbe the gal never pulled a trigger afore. Figgered the roar was her own gun. Thet's why she was so doggoned sure she beefed Bill. Now we gotta corral the real killer."

"Sich as?" inquired 'Pache curiously.

"Guess!" grunted Dan. "I'm ridin' fer the CCC."

Someone killed Bill Boulderson, that was plain. Mildred Kincaid was cleared. That left three suspects—Lanky Lansdale, Cherokee and Tim Coghlan. Lanky was near the corral, watching Cherokee's horsebreaking, which alibied both. Tim Coghlan remained.

The sheriff liked the rugged CCC foreman, had him figured as square. True, Tim was tough and quick on the trigger. Harris swore softly. That was the hell of it—quick on the trigger. Tim and the stiff-necked Boxed B boss had been feuding for years. The two crews had clashed recently at Willow Spring. Tim

was sweet on June Boulderson and Bill had barred him from the Boxed B. To cap that, the chunky CCC foreman had sworn he would let daylight into Bill!

Yes, there was motive a-plenty, and the longer the sheriff considered the case against Tim Coghlan the more air-tight it seemed. There was only one weak link in the chain—Tim's character. He didn't carry a bushwhacker's brand.

A welcoming yell greeted the sheriff as he stepped into the cook shack of the CCC. Raising a hand in greeting, he glanced around. A double row of CCC waddies faced each other the length of a long trestle table. At one end sat Smythe-Jones, garbed like his punchers and thoroughly at home. At the other end was Tim Coghlan.

Huge platters of smoking beef, boiled potatoes and savory beans decorated the table, together with glistening pots of steaming coffee. The pangs of hunger smote the sheriff. His last meal had been breakfast, before sunup.

"Hey!" yelled Tim. "Set down and fill up! Slide along, you hawgs!"

Harris lifted a long leg over the bench and eased into place. "Ain't it hell," the sheriff told himself with an inward groan, "tuh eat with a jasper afore yuh knot a rope around his neck!"

The crew topped off the meal, rolled smokes and drifted outside. Harris, having finished his heaped platter, eased his belt with vast content, felt for the makin's and relaxed. Then he remembered his mission.

"Say, Tim," said the sheriff quietly, "le's chin awhile, over at the house, mebbe?"

The CCC foreman nodded. "'Bout Bill's killin', I guess. Too bad Kincaid's gal went on the rampage. Hyphen took it hard, acts like a sick calf. Want him tuh set in?"

"Yep!" replied the sheriff shortly, and the three jingled across the yard.

Smythe-Jones set a match to a table lamp in the living room of the ranch-house and dropped listlessly into a rocker. Tim leaned carelessly against the fireplace.

"Wal," began the sheriff abruptly, eyeing the forlorn Englishman, "I got good news fer you—Mildred Kincaid didn't salivate Bill Boulderson."

The Englishman stared, gulped. "Are . . . you . . . sure?"

"Dead sure. Dug her slug outta the ceiling."

"Wal, who in heck did plug him?" demanded Tim.

"You oughta know!" said the sheriff softly. His right hand lingered over the protruding butt of his gun. "You beefed him!"

VI

TIM'S reaction was one of complete bewilderment. "I—beefed—Bill?"

"What gun did the gal tote?" asked the sheriff evenly.

"A thirty-eight."

"And what gun d'yuh pack?"

"Forty-five."

"Doc dug a .45 slug outta Bill. Ef yuh didn't throw the slug, who did?"

Tim shrugged hopelessly. "There warn't no other jasper around," he admitted.

"Then I reckon we best hit fer town."

A cascade of punchers burst into the room, pinned the two against the huge rock fireplace. Harris jerked his gun, jammed the barrel into the foreman's belly.

"Lay off," he told the waddies, "or I'll scatter Tim's guts!" He turned to the lank Englishman. "So the CCC is above the law!" Dan Harris' voice was cold with anger. "Yuh raise hell when yuh please, and the sheriff be damned! Wal, mister, I'm takin' Coghlan tuh Cactus—right now!" With a quick motion he jerked his left-hand gun. It swiveled, belt high. "And the fust jasper who horns in ull go, too—across the saddle!"

Smythe-Jones smiled. "Mere bravado, my dear sheriff. You are hopelessly outnumbered. And you are not bullet-proof."

Tim cut in harshly, "Nix on the shenanigans, Hyphen. I'm ridin'!"

"But," persisted the Englishman, "is one man to bluff the whole CCC crew, even though he is protected by a star?"

"He ain't bluffin'," growled the foreman, "but you'd never live long enough tuh know it." He jerked his head toward Brazos. "Hey, old-timer. Ketch my roan and throw the kak on him. Le's

go, Dan!"

Stirrup to stirrup, the sheriff and his prisoner rode through the lonely hills. Quiet clothed the canyons, until Tim's voice ended a long spell of silence. "I never plugged Bill and you should know it."

"How come he stopped a forty-five?"

"Most every jasper in the Valley totes a forty-five. The dog-blasted bushwhacker coulda Injuned up tuh Bill's winder and snaked away, and no one the wiser."

"Who claimed Bill was beefed from the window?" countered the sheriff sharply.

"I do. He warn't in the house and there warn't no other place."

"Did yuh comb out the house?"

"Why should I," returned Tim sulkily, "when the gal claimed she kilt him?" He switched off the point abruptly. "Carlos was coyotin' around the spread."

"Could yuh swear tuh thet?"

"I could swear tuh his grey. He dipped down inter the arroyo as I rode in."

"Yeah!" grunted Harris doubtfully.

The following morning, the sheriff drew contentedly upon his after-breakfast cigarette in the Chinese restaurant. He had just ordered the prisoner's breakfast sent over, when an impetuous hand pushed aside the dusty fly curtains that screened the entrance and a girl stepped quickly into the restaurant.

"Sheriff!"

Harris' head came around. He saw the tragedy in June Boulderson's eyes as she came toward him.

"Slide onto a stool, ma'am," he invited heartily. "Eat breakfast yet?"

She shook her head, balling a torn handkerchief in a small fist. "I couldn't eat," she declared, and then the question burst from her. "Why did Mildred Kincaid kill Uncle?"

"She didn't," replied Harris quietly. "She's been released."

"But Lanky said—"

"Yep, we all barked up the wrong tree. The schoolma'am fired—and missed."

"Why? She scarcely knew Uncle," interjected June. "Fired and missed!" she repeated. "B-but he's dead!"

"Tim Coghlan's in the hoosegow."

"Not Tim!" The girl grasped a stool for support. "I knew they would fight some time," she moaned. "If only it could have been anyone but Tim." Her eyes sought the sheriff's, puzzled, appealing. "But Lanky said there was only one shot. He saw the gun, a thirty-eight."

Harris slid off the stool, grasped the nerve-shaken June's arm. "What say you talk it over with Tim," he suggested. "I reckon he's kinda lonely. Le's drift!"

Twenty minutes later, when June Boulderson burst into the sheriff's office, her agitation had been swept away by surging indignation.

"There has been a terrible mistake," she charged. "Tim found that woman with a smoking gun. Poor Uncle was dead. You can't accuse Tim like this. He's innocent!"

"Mebbe," returned Harris dryly. "What say we let the jedge decide?"

JUNE stamped her small foot angrily. "But the poor dear, he shouldn't be locked up like a criminal," she stormed.

"You ride back tuh the ranch," advised Harris.

"I'll do nothing of the kind. I'll go to see Mildred Kincaid. She'll clear him!"

"As yuh say, ma'am!" sighed Harris.

The sheriff sauntered out in front of the courthouse and settled on the wide wooden steps, eying Main Street as it stirred to greet another day. Astride a grey, a rider loped past and raised a gloved hand in jaunty salutation. Harris returned the gesture, squinting to identify the lean features beneath the wide-brimmed sombrero. The stranger pulled up outside The Bull Pen. Then, in a flash, recollection came.

"Bill Hargreaves!" the sheriff muttered. "Wanted fer a killin' in Texas. The jasper Boulderson put the finger on. And Tim swore he lamped a grey near the Boxed B. Hell! Ef a hairpin u'll kill once, he'll kill twice. And Hargreaves shore got good reason."

Harris crossed to the saloon. Hargreaves leaned against the bar, alone.

Mac's eyebrows went up as the sheriff pushed through the batwings. Harris

seldom drank before sundown. The burly barkeep set the glass he was polishing upon the shelf and moved two paces down the bar. The scatter gun was located right there.

The sheriff rested his elbows on the bar beside the lean rider. "Yuh pack plenty gall hittin' town. I still got thet Texas murder warrant, and another fer jailbreak."

Hargreaves laughed.

"Say, Sheriff, you beat around them Bad Lands fer a spell with a gang of chili-eaters fer company and you'd risk a rope tuh mingle with white men."

"Yuh tell me you're night-ridin'," Harris smiled, "and I'll pack yuh back tuh Texas on thet old warrant."

"I ain't tellin' nuthin'. I'm ridin' fer the OOO."

"As good as a confession," murmured the sheriff.

"What other outfit u'd hire me with my rep?" demanded the rider. "Damn Boulderson's ferret eyes!"

"Lamped Bill Boulderson lately?"

"Nope, and don't hanker to."

"Yuh won't. He's daid!"

The puncher's eyes gleamed with incredulity. He held his glass high in somber humor. "Heah's tuh Bill Boulderson! May the devil prod the bustard aplenty when he's stokin' the fires of hell!"

"Yuh ain't heard the whole story!" The sheriff's voice was soft. "Bill was bushwhacked, and the lousy bushwhacker forked a grey hoss, just like yourn."

Hargreaves caught a flash in the backbar mirror of Mac's big paw hefting the sawed-off shotgun. He slowly trickled out another drink.

"And how come yuh figgered I forked the grey?" he drawled.

"Ain't but two around Cactus—thet gelding of yourn and Carlos' stallion."

The Texan smiled grimly. "An' Carlos wouldn't plug a jasper in the back? Like hell he wouldn't!"

"Not ef he didn't hev a good reason. Holt them paws on the bar, I wanna see yore iron."

The sheriff deftly slipped Hargreaves' gun from leather, broke it, ran quick eyes over the load, grunted and replaced it in the holster.

"You always tote a forty-four?"

"Nuthin' else but," declared the Texan.

"Carlos been ridin' around the Boxed B of late?"

"I wouldn't know. Thet Mexican drifts around like a lobo. You still figger I bushwhacked Boulderson?"

"Not with thet forty-four," admitted the sheriff, and turned toward the batwings. "So long. Keep yore runnin' iron cold!"

"We use a stamp iron on the OOO. Strictly lawful," returned the Texan, a humorous gleam in his wary eyes.

If Hargreaves was guilty, considered the sheriff, heading back for the courthouse, he might have switched guns after plugging Boulderson. It was plain he was either a doggoned slick hombre or was innocent of the killing.

MEANWHILE, a determined young lady had turned her pony's head northward and cantered out of town toward McCleod School. The schoolhouse was set in a shallow draw beside the stage road, half a mile out of town. Behind it, in a thick stand of scrub oak higher up the draw, set a neat clapboard cabin, which for several years had been occupied by Mildred Kincaid and her father.

June Boulderson kneed her pony around the schoolhouse and followed a winding trail up the draw. The cabin was barely visible through spreading trees. June was ranch bred, with the habitual alertness of those who ride the range. Between the tree trunks, she glimpsed a powerful grey horse tied to the porch railing. There was but one horse like that in Antelope Valley—Carlos' stallion.

Instantly, a question leapt into her mind: What was the Mexican, with his doubtful reputation, doing at the cabin of the McCleod schoolteacher?

Impulsively, she checked her pony, glanced quickly around for cover. Among the trees a large pile of cordwood had been stacked, winter fuel for the school stove. She pulled off the trail, rounded the pile and reined up on the far side. Here, screened from the house and trail, she waited, peering over the pile of wood.

The front door of the cabin opened and Carlos appeared, black sombrero in hand. Behind him stood Mildred Kincaid, speaking low and earnestly. White teeth flashing, Carlos was apparently reassuring her.

Of a sudden, the lounging Mexican straightened, swung around and stared down the draw. For a moment June thought he had sighted her between the gnarled tree trunks. Then, on the far side of the woodpile, she heard the slow plodding of hoofs.

Moving slowly toward the cabin, upon his shaggy mule, the unkempt figure of the preacher came into view, big Bible clutched beneath one arm. His head was bent as though in prayer. Behind his cantle a shabby bedroll was lashed.

Silence, a guilty silence, it seemed to the watching girl, enveloped the pair on the porch. At the rail, the mule halted. As though awakening, the old preacher's head jerked up and he galvanized into angry action. With surprising agility, he slid out of the saddle and ran up the porch steps. Thin forefinger pointed as if in accusation, he strode up to the Mexican.

Carlos, towering above the scrawny preacher, caressed his smudge of mustache and eyed him with amusement.

June was too far distant to hear more than the jangle of the preacher's high-pitched voice, but it was evident that he was scourging the Mexican with his tongue. Finally, bony fists clenched, Peter Kincaid rushed at Carlos.

His daughter shrieked and threw herself between the two men. She wrapped her arms around the preacher, holding him back. The girl eased him into the cabin, struggling and gesticulating. The door slammed shut.

Carlos shrugged, jingled down the steps and untied his horse. Humming blithely, he walked the grey down the trail.

June waited until he had ample time to ride clear, then heeled her pony and pulled out from behind the woodpile. Dismounting in front of the cabin, she ground-hitched her mount, approached the door and rapped briskly with the handle of her quirt.

"Why did you try to shoot my uncle?" demanded June abruptly, when Mildred Kincaid opened the door. "He never injured you, scarcely knew you."

"I am sorry," the schoolteacher's voice was strained. "I cannot discuss it. Please excuse me!"

She stepped back and would have closed the door, but June's small foot shot forward and blocked it.

"No, you don't!" Anger surged into her voice. "You may fool the sheriff, but not me. You tried to kill my uncle, and Tim Coghlan is in jail charged with your crime. He'll hang. Do you hear me? Hang! And you are to blame!" She paused, but Mildred Kincaid just stood staring. "Well, why don't you say something?" stormed June. "Is that Mexican your accomplice, or your lover? Why did you ever come to Antelope Valley, you—murderess!"

The preacher appeared behind his daughter. "Condemn not that ye be not condemned!" he rasped. "Go, sister! You know not what you say!"

"I know that the finest man in Antelope Valley is rotting in jail for her crime," returned June. "How can you mouth platitudes when your daughter is a killer? Make her talk and free Tim Coghlan!"

The preacher's dark eyes probed the excited girl. His voice rose. "Begone, sister. Cease from anger and forsake wrath. The Lord God shall be judge."

"You hypocrite!" June flung away in disgust. "That girl and Carlos are working together, like a pair of buzzards. I'll see them brought to justice, if it's the last thing I do!"

The preacher gazed sorrowfully as she stamped down the steps, mounted and galloped wildly down the draw.

VII

IN THE days that followed, the prime topic of conversation in Cactus was Bill Boulderson's killing. School was out for the summer, but it was taken for granted that Mildred Kincaid would not be hired again. Carlos was sighted frequently in the vicinity of the McCleod Schoolhouse, and upon the teacher's rare visits to town the good women of Cactus carefully looked the other way.

One forenoon, Smythe-Jones tied his pony outside the courthouse and swung on long legs toward the jail. The outer door gaped wide open, likewise the steel-barred door of Tim's cell. A newspaper was spread over the straw mattress of the bunk. Tim and 'Pache hunched over it, engrossed in a hand of cribbage.

"The atmosphere of this jail is most delightfully informal," commented the Englishman. "If I were Tim, I'd walk out."

"Whar to?" rejoined 'Pache, absent-mindedly. He laid out his hand triumphantly. "Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, fifteen-six, fifteen-eight, and three pairs—fourteen. Top thet, you maverick!"

"Thet's six games straight," grumbled Tim, pitching over a dollar. "Ef Dan don't spring me pronto, I'll be plumb ruint."

"Yuh won't need dinero whar you're goin'," grunted 'Pache. He tested the dollar with his teeth, gathered up the cards. "Wal, gents, I'll drift. Ef yuh couldn't shoot better'n yuh play crib, Tim, yuh'd be ridin' high and handsome."

"If yuh lunkheads don't rattle yore hocks and rope the coyote who kilt Bill," retorted the foreman, "I'm liable tuh bust out and git him myself."

'Pache dropped an eyelid. "Dan ain't sayin' nuthin', but yuh kin stake yore saddle he ain't doin' nuthin'."

The dark-skinned deputy moved down the passage between the cells, ostentatiously slammed the heavy door and locked it. Smythe-Jones pulled out his pipe and settled down on the bunk.

"What a damnable affair," he ejaculated.

"Yuh ain't tellin' me," returned Tim feelingly. "And I figger Carlos is neck-deep in it."

"Damnation take this Carlos!" The Englishman sucked the stem of his pipe. "Since your arrest, the ranch has been a little—er—disorganized. Brazos tells me that rustlers are making serious inroads. I post guards, but it is extremely difficult to prevent the forays of these cattle thieves with such a vast expanse of wild country across our flank, so to speak. We need your leadership, Tim."

Tim Coghlan paced the cell. "Dog-gone it," he fumed, "why don't Dan spring me? As fer thet blasted greaser, he'll sweep the range clean." He swung toward his boss. "Miss Kin[illegible], she done talked any?"

"Not a whisper, old chap."

"'Pears like she's in cahoots with the Mexican," said Tim sourly.

"Impossible, my dear boy, she's not that type. I have a feeling that the brute must have some sinister hold upon her. This sheriff of yours is really most disappointing."

"Don't let Dan fool yuh. They's plenty jaspers plaitin' hair bridles 'cos they figgered him wrong."

"Plaiting hair bridles?" Smythe-Jones' voice was puzzled.

"Servin' time in the pen."

"I fail to see the connection."

"They got nuthin' else tuh do except plait hair bridles," explained Tim patiently. "Fellers say it gits wearisome, after the fust year."

The Englishman jerked to his feet. "Well, have you any suggestions for action?"

Tim grinned.

"Jest set tight, Hyphen," he drawled. "Reckon Dan 'pears kinda slow tuh yuh smart city slickers, but when he moves, he erupts!"

CUT HIGH in the adobe wall of the cell, the small, square aperture that served as a window turned to black velvet, spangled with stars. Tim was lying upon his bunk and watching it idly, when suddenly a dark shadow blanked out the stars. Tim blinked and sat up. Again, the square of starlight disappeared. A third shadow—and something thudded heavily upon the floor of the cell.

Tim swung his legs clear of the blankets, dropped upon his knees and groped around in the gloom. His fingers encountered cloth, wrapped around a solid object, tightly secured with a rawhide thong. A low whistle escaped him as he ripped off the wrappings.

Next morning, when Bull entered with the breakfast tray, he found Tim seated upon his bunk, examining a businesslike .45 with professional interest. At the jailor's gasp of surprise, he glanced up and jumped off the bunk, gun leveled.

"Throw 'em up!" he ejaculated.

The breakfast crashed to the ground and Bull made for the door quicker than a scared jackrabbit.

"Dan!" roared the deputy. "He done got his paws on a gun! He's abustin' outta the cooler!"

Harris hit for the jail door, trailed by the hard-breathing Bull. He dodged inside, gun gripped in his fist.

Tim rocked on his bunk, choking with laughter.

The sheriff eyed the locked cell door, the mess of flapjacks and sticky molasses, pooled in coffee, splattered over the floor and swung wrathfully on his deputy.

"What in hell's got inter yuh?" he demanded wrathfully.

"He was totin' a hawgleg," accused Bull, "as big as a cannon."

"Shore," grinned the prisoner. He held up the gun. "Ain't she a dandy?"

Harris unlocked the cell door. "Gimme thet iron!" he grated. Tim handed it over promptly and plumped down on the bunk.

"Le'shavethe story, straight."

Tim told how the gun was flung through the window. " 'Pears like some jasper wants me outta heah," he concluded.

"Some CCC waddie, mebbe," suggested the sheriff. He plugged out a shell, examined it idly.

"Hell, no!" rejoined the prisoner. "They coulda slipped me a hawgleg any time."

But Harris' attention was elsewhere. He dove into a pants pocket for his knife, pried at the shell he held in his hand. The plump lead bullet slid into his palm. The sheriff tapped the case on the wall. No powder trickled out.

"Empty!" he commented laconically.

One by one, he removed the bullets from the remaining four shells. The powder had been removed from every shell. As an offensive weapon, the gun was useless.

"Git it?" asked the sheriff softly.

"Shore," growled Tim. "The lousy sheepherder who passed me that iron figgered I'd make a break—and I'd shore have been cold meat." He spat in disgust. "I gamble it's another of the greaser's sneakin' tricks."

"Mebbe," returned Harris slowly.

WESTWARD, a rider pushed through the billowing hills. For hours, it seemed to Smythe-Jones, he had ridden toward the mountains, crouched like tawny monsters awaiting their prey. Still, mirage-like, they remained distant and aloof. Maybe, thought the Englishman whimsically, they were withdrawing in contempt from the puny human who dared invade their fastnesses.

The sun circled and the rolling hills faded into the heat haze in his rear. He entered a region of arid valleys and dark canyons and threaded through a defile thick cluttered with broken rock. Abruptly, the walls fell back and the Englishman looked down upon a plain, blotched with white alkali. Movement caught his eye.

He checked his mount, pulled out his glasses. The lenses brought close a bunch of perhaps forty steers, weary and sore-footed, headed westward, with four riders on their flanks.

Smythe-Jones replaced his glasses, spurred his pony to a canter. He was a way out upon the plain before his presence was observed by the riders ahead. Three wheeled and jogged back to meet him, fanning out. The remaining herder, in a frenzy of energy, urged the steers into a lumbering trot.

The Englishman eased his blowing pony as the strangers drew close. Two, on the wings, were Mexican *vaqueros;* the third, riding straight for him, was a lean-faced puncher. The Mexicans reined up, waiting expectantly. The puncher came on alone.

"Kinda off yore range, ain't yuh, mister?" he drawled.

"My name is Smythe-Jones—hyphen Jones. I own the CCC."

"Yeah?"

"I wish to see Carlos Compana. I believe his ranch is in this vicinity."

"Yuh ain't huntin' strays?"

"No, merely a neighborly visit."

"Wal, I reckon yuh'll find Carlos right ahead." The puncher jerked a sack of makin's from his shirt pocket. "Guess we'll give them steers a chance tuh git outta sight. Yuh might scare 'em." He fashioned a smoke with one hand. "They call me Hargreaves," he added. "Heard of yuh—and yore camel."

Smythe-Jones heeled his pony. He

itched to glimpse the brand on those steers.

Eyes wary, Hargreaves' hand dropped to the gun on his hip.

"Hold it, mister! It ain't healthy tuh hurry on OOO range."

"You're beastly inhospitable," commented the Englishman in disgust, checking his mount.

Hargreaves said nothing, leisurely set a match to his cigarette. Fifty paces distant on either side, the two *vaqueros* sat their ponies like statues. Beyond, there was now no sign of the steers save for drifting dust.

The puncher slewed his lean form around. "Wal," he decided, "guess we kin drift."

He wheeled his pony, and with the Englishman at his tail, headed across the valley. Like watchdogs, the Mexicans trailed behind. The Englishman had a feeling that he was more prisoner than guest.

Ahead, a ragged wall of granite skirted the valley, notched by gloomy ravines. The sun was sinking low as Hargreaves led the way through a break in the wall between two eroding bastions of rock.

They emerged into a canyon several hundred feet in width, bounded by precipitous cliffs. Against the farther side chaparral made a patch of refreshing green against the dun grey around, and through the brush Smythe-Jones picked out the outlines of several jacals. A campfire gleamed like a huge red spark. Ponies drifted around, cropping the sparse patches of stunted grass. There was not a cow in sight.

"Surely this is not the ranch!" The Englishman pulled abreast of Hargreaves, eyes puzzled.

The lean rider chuckled. "The OOO in person, mister."

"But your facilities are—er—extremely meager."

"We kin handle plenty beef," said the puncher dryly.

They broke through the screening brush and emerged upon a small clearing, in the center of which a Mexican tended pots suspended above the fire. A rude log hut stood on the farther side, sided by jacals. Smythe-Jones' eyes, never still, tallied at least two dozen *vaqueros* lounging around.

HARGREAVES slid out of the saddle, entered the log hut. Presently he emerged from the cabin, and jerked his thumb toward the open door. The Englishman dismounted, stepped through the cabin doorway and glanced around curiously in the dim light. In the center of the room was set a rough table. Behind it was seated the man he sought.

"You weesh to see me?" Carlos Campana's deep voice was frigidly polite.

"Rather!" Smythe-Jones jerked a vacant chair back from the table and dropped down opposite his host. "But you know," he confessed, with an engaging smile, "I am at a loss to begin. The subject is—er—delicate."

"Mees Kincaid?"

"Dear me, no! I am contemplating an alliance, or one might say, a partnership."

"So?"

The Englishman coughed. "One must be frank. A spade is a spade, however disguised. I need money, *dinero* I believe you term it. We have a considerable number of cows on the CCC. Tim Coghlan, the foreman, is in jail. I have authority to discharge the crew. What a wonderful opportunity—for someone!"

Carlos stared blankly at the Englishman. "Are you crazee?" he ejaculated. "You ask me, an 'onest rancher, to rustle your own cows?"

Smythe-Jones smiled. "Dear me, no. I wish it were my stock. I am merely a manager, an employee. The real owners live across the sea, in England."

"And you weesh to double-cross them, yes?"

"You express it crudely. I merely wish to grasp an opportunity."

The 'breed frowned. It was plain he was nonplussed. "I do not need your 'elp," he finally burst out. "I have many *vaqueros*."

"And the CCC has plenty of punchers," smiled the other. "Come, my friend, let us be frank! You are stealing CCC stock, in small bunches, no doubt. I can remove the entire CCC crew. That will leave the range unguarded. You could drive off cows by the carload with no risk. In fact, I am willing to work with you. But you must act quickly. Tim Coghlan may be released at any time."

"'Ee weel 'ang for murder."

"Possibly. Personally, I am doubtful."

Carlos jumped to his feet, paced the cabin. "You weel ride with me to rustle theese cows?"

"Delighted, old chap."

"And the *dinero?* You weesh 'ow much?"

"One-half, payable immediately the cattle are sold," returned Smythe-Jones promptly.

Carlos threw up his arms. "Imposseeble! One-third to me, one-third to my *vaqueros,* one-third to you."

Smythe-Jones sighed. "Why haggle? One-third it is."

VIII

BRAZOS, jaw working spasmodically upon a chaw, jingled into the Cactus jail. After the episode of the .45, Tim's jailors had taken it for granted that he would make no effort to escape and, since he was the only prisoner, the outer door was left ajar and visitors came and went at will.

"Ef yuh don't quit settin' around this doggoned canary cage," the weathered puncher told his foreman, "there ain't goin' tuh be no CCC. Thet dang-blasted Limejuicer's plum loco! Done fired the crew, ain't a waddie on the spread. Kept me on, claims he needs a caretaker. I rattle round thet empty bunkhouse like a pill in a barrel."

"And when did all this happen?" inquired Tim.

"Yesterday. The Limey rode out two days back, actin' kinda riled. He drifted in at sundown, when the boys was at chuck. Fires 'em with no more to-do than he was orderin' a drink. But chew on this!"

The old mossyhorn almost swallowed his chaw. "The Limey sez tuh ride in and tell yuh tuh keep the crew together. 'Have 'em stick around town,' he sez. 'They kin swim in booze as long as they're on hand when I need 'em. Tell Tim tuh draw on me for their wages.' Kin yuh beat that? Leaves the range wide open and pays a bunch of useless saddle-pounders tuh swiggle booze in town!"

The CCC foreman's brow furrowed. "'Pears a crazy notion, but Hyphen plays his hand close tuh his chest. Ef he's crazy, so's a coyote. Heard from Carlos?"

"Jumpin' around like a flea on a houn' dawg and bitin' off chunks of prime steers." Brazos groaned. "The greasers u'll stage a regular roundup now."

Tim slapped him on the back. "Don't let it faze you! Git word tuh the boys thet I crave a word with them."

* * * * *

Smythe-Jones assumed his new role of rustler with gusto. Again and again he rode with the swarthy *vaqueros,* combing the hills and draws and helping to gather the cream of the CCC herds and change their brands to OOO. But always the lean-featured Hargreaves was less than a rope's length distant. Carlos could never forget that the Englishman had once outwitted him, and he was taking no chances.

Strangely, a bond of comradeship was strengthening between the renegade puncher and the latest recruit to the rustling gang. Once, as Smythe-Jones and Hargreaves rode eastward through the shadowed hills, a bunch of ragged *vaqueros* clattering behind, the Englishman turned to the tightmouthed puncher.

"I say, old chap, you don't belong with this filthy gang. Why don't you cut loose?"

"Why don't yuh?" came back Hargreaves curtly.

"Oh, the lure of easy money, I suppose," returned Smythe-Jones airily.

"Wal, I gotta eat."

"Come, come, that's no problem. There are a score of legitimate outfits in the valley. An excellent cowman such as you would have no difficulty in—er—obtaining a position."

"Limey," returned the man at his stirrup, somberly, "I'm a killer. They's a warrant out fer me. With my rep, ain't a spread would find a hole fer me."

"There is one ranch will employ you. The CCC."

Hargreaves laughed mirthlessly. "Wal, they shore could use a few hands, but seein' as yuh wrecked the spread, I figger they wouldn't kill the fatted calf if a pard of yourn rode in." His voice deepened. "Ef I was in yore boots, Limey, I'd collect from Carlos and split the breeze. If thet Sheriff Harris hits

yore trail, you're a goner. He'll shore stick till hell freezes!"

"I really hadn't thought of that," confessed Smythe-Jones.

"Think fast, *amigo.* Yuh cain't get away with this forever."

And so that evening, as the renegades gathered around the campfire in the mountain canyon, Smythe-Jones waited until Carlos emerged from his cabin and sauntered across the clearing. Then he rose leisurely to his feet and approached the 'breed.

"Pardon me," he said, "but when do we realize upon our spoils? The canyon is practically chockablock with animals. I think that perhaps I should—er—cash in and leave."

"But our companee, ees eet not pleasant?" Carlos smiled.

"The company is everything that can be expected, old fellow, but thought of the sheriff intrudes."

"Ah, 'ee ees scared! Like the coyote, 'ee fills 'ees belly and sleenks away. Yes?"

Carlos' derisive tones carried to the men bunched around the fire. Hargreaves turned his head. "He's on one hell of a spot if the sheriff gits wise."

"You weel keep out of thees, Beel," snapped the 'breed. "You are *segundo,* but I, Carlos Compana, am boss of the OOO." He turned his attention again to the Englishman. "I am an 'onorable man, senor. You weel geet your *dinero* when we sell the beef."

"Quite so. But I may find it expedient to leave suddenly—and I need money."

"You shall 'ave eet," Carlos assured him carelessly. "*Manana,* mebbe!"

"I wish to receive my recompense now."

"But eet ees imposseeble. The cows, they are not sold."

"When do you expect to sell them?"

Carlos shrugged. "*Manana!*"

"This is rather irritating." There was asperity in Smythe-Jones' voice.

UNHEEDING, the renegade pushed past him to the fire, engaged Hargreaves in low-voiced talk.

The Englishman watched the dark, hatchet face, annoyance in his blue eyes. It came to him that he was in a delicate position, an unarmed man at the mercy of a renegade gang, any one of whom, with the possible exception of Hargreaves, would slit his throat for a gold eagle, or his boots. Worse, he had burned his bridges behind him, and the wily Carlos was well aware of that.

Carlos turned back toward his cabin. Smythe-Jones still stood apart, outside the circle of firelight.

"*Buenas noches, senor!*" There was mockery in the 'breed's deep voice. He paused. "Mees Kincaid, she verra fine girl. We ride often, we two, when you drive the cows. Mebbe we marree—when you are in preeson."

Chuckling, he passed on. Smythe-Jones settled moodily down beside Hargreaves at the fire.

"You wanna drift?" The rider spoke softly.

"Not without my share of the proceeds."

"Wal, we trail the herd at sunup."

The Englishman quickened to alert attention. "To the buyer?"

"Tuh the railroad. We ship from Carson Wells."

"It might afford an opportunity," murmured Smythe-Jones. "Where would I join you?"

"We lay over at Coyote Spring fust night. Hit southwest, fer the sawtooth peak."

"Thanks—pard!" The Englishman thrilled as he mouthed the unfamiliar term. At last, he felt really akin to this Westerner!

At dawn the next morning Smythe-Jones, hidden in the chaparral, watched Hargreaves and a dozen *vaqueros,* ghostlike in the grey light, head for the canyon entrance. A little later Carlos emerged from his cabin. Then the Englishman saw the squat Pedro lead the 'breed's grey stallion into the clearing. Carlos mounted and loped away.

"Where on earth is he heading for?" the Englishman asked himself. "If he rides with the herd, I'm sunk. Well, one must take chances!"

He shrugged into a leather jacket and moved cautiously through the brush. Unobserved, he reached his pony, and working fast tied his bedroll behind the cantle, swung into leather and commenced to walk the pony toward the canyon entrance.

The light was strengthening now. He pricked the pony into a trot. Then his gaze became rigid, riveted upon the entrance to the narrow passage that was the canyon's gateway. A *vaquero* lounged against the rock wall. Carlos had set a guard!

Smythe-Jones' probing eyes took in a Winchester, propped against the rock. At sound of the pony's hoofs, the Mexican straightened, grasped the Winchester, stepped out, barring passage.

"*Buenos dias, senor!*" greeted the Englishman, holding the trot.

"*Buenos dias!*" growled the guard. Uncertainly, he raised the rifle hip-high, covering the rider.

Smythe-Jones reined up, stepped down. The *vaquero* stared with dull eyes. The Englishman stepped close, plunged his right hand into a pants pocket, drew out jingling gold pieces.

"For you, my friend," he smiled.

The guard gazed stupidly at the glinting coins. Smythe-Jones' fist took him squarely on the point of the chin. With a grunt, he crumpled and lay inert across the trail.

"That, my friend, is what is known in fistic parlance as a straight left," remarked the Englishman.

He dropped the coins back into his pocket, dragged the limp form aside and remounted.

Outside the canyon, the alkalied plain stretched before him. Far out, a rider was galloping eastward. Smythe-Jones focused his glasses, gazed long and earnestly.

"Excellent!" he murmured. "*Bon voyage,* friend Carlos!"

Southward, a dust cloud marked the progress of the herd. The Englishman wheeled his pony and hit toward it.

SETH DAVIS, the railroad agent at Carson Wells, was a lonely man, with no company but his hens. Behind steel spectacles, his eyes brightened when he glanced up from the telegraph key and glimpsed a long column of cows snaking through the hills. A trail crew was always good for plenty of range gossip, and ofttimes they brought a bottle along.

But when the slow-plodding column drew near and the huge sombreros of the *vaqueros* on point were plain, Seth aimed a kick at the wastepaper basket and loosed a disgusted oath.

"That thieving bunch of OOO spigs agen," he muttered. "Reckon I best corral them hens."

He hastened toward the rude hen house behind his shack and began vigorously shooing his flock inside.

Riding in the lead, Smythe-Jones and Hargreaves sighted the plump, shirt-sleeved figure chasing elusive white specks that were hens. Hargreaves chuckled. "Last trip, we et chicken. Mighty tasty dish. Guess the railroader's takin' no chances this time."

He pulled off for the depot, while the Englishman and the *vaqueros* turned the lead steers toward the corrals. The bawling herd watered and penned, the crew piled out of leather and hunkered in the shade of the station. Hargreaves joined them.

"Reckon we'll spread our rolls overnight and beat it at sunup," he observed. He eyed the locked hen house with a wry grin. "Shore could stomach a mess of chicken!"

Smythe-Jones hauled to his feet. "Maybe we can persuade the gentleman to trade. One can but try."

"Want I should side yuh?"

Smythe-Jones hastily raised a restraining hand. "Absolutely no, old chap. This calls for diplomacy of a high order. Strictly a one-man job. Wish me luck!"

He disappeared around the corner of the red-painted depot. The station agent was running an oily rag through the barrel of a big Sharps buffalo gun when the Englishman's tall form shadowed the doorway of the little office.

"Defense measures?" he inquired gravely.

"You betcher!" snapped the agent. "I'll blow a hole as big as a watermelon, by criminy, in the first chili-eater that raids my hen house!"

"And I'd be the first to swear it was justifiable homicide," concurred Smythe-Jones heartily. "Of all persons, I thoroughly detest a thief."

"Say, where did you spring from?" inquired the agent, curiously. "Thet rock-faced *segundo* always brings a crew of spigs."

"I have recently acquired a partnership in the OOO," beamed his visitor.

He slid a flask out of his hip pocket, set it on the counter. "Would a snifter entice?"

"Tequila?" The railroader's voice was suspicious.

"Bourbon, old chap. Guaranteed to bring laughter to your lips and solace to your soul!"

The agent set the gun on the telegraph table, stepped forward with ill-concealed eagerness, removed the cork and sniffed the contents.

"H'm!" he mumbled. The flask tilted and his Adam's apple wobbled. He set the flask down with a deep sigh. "The real mazoola, stranger."

"The name is Smythe-Jones—hyphen Jones."

"Glad tuh make your acquaintance, Mister Hyphen Jones. They call me Seth."

"Have another, Seth."

"Wal, it's a treat after alkali water." Again the contents of the flask dwindled.

"I understand those ruffians outside stole several of your fine birds."

Seth wiped his lips. "Let it pass!"

"Indeed not," rejoined Smythe-Jones indignantly. "As part owner of the OOO, I feel a responsibility." He dropped a gold eagle on the counter. "Would that compensate?"

"Aw!" remonstrated the agent.

"I insist," said Smythe-Jones firmly. "Now, Seth, could I purchase, say, six more of these magnificent birds. Your hens have been the talk of the ranch."

"Wal." Seth pinched his nose, considering deeply. "Them hens is special, so to speak, hand-raised from the egg."

"Ten dollars!" tempted the Englishman.

The agent eyed the glittering gold piece. "Shore a pleasure," he decided.

Smythe-Jones seated himself on the counter, pulled out his pipe. "Have another drink!" he urged, and Seth sank into his office chair, flask in hand. "I was wondering," mused the Englishman, puffing slowly, "if I might seek your co-operation. Our records are a little—er—muddled. Would it be too much to ask for a summary of the cows shipped, say, during the past three months, with the consignees' names and addresses?"

The agent reached out and grabbed a wad of duplicate consignment notes impaled upon a spike.

"No trouble atall," he said affably.

Fifteen minutes later Smythe-Jones closed his little pocketbook. "Now, could I trouble you for a telegraph form?"

The Englishman scribbled three messages and fished another gold coin out of his pocket.

"You are a man of discernment, Seth," he said, "a man I can trust. Dispatch these messages with your accustomed speed and breathe word of them to no man. Strictly confidential! Do we understand each other? Good! Now, let us hie to the hen house. I wager my *vaqueros* are positively watering at the mouth."

IX

TWO DAYS later the trail crew straggled back into the canyon. While the *vaqueros* stripped the gear off their trail-stained ponies and loosed them to water and pasture, the puncher and Smythe-Jones pulled aside. The Englishman knew that trouble was brewing; Hargreaves sensed it.

Carlos stepped out into the clearing and summoned several members of the crew to his side. While he threw questions at the dusky riders, his eyes, smouldering with venom, flicked incessantly at Smythe-Jones. Finally he strode toward the Englishman.

"So, Senor Hyphen," he hissed, "you rode to the railroad against orders? You theenk you make play weeth Carlos Compana? Come, I weel show you another fool who did not obey 'ees orders."

He swung upon his heel and crashed through the sparse brush. The Englishman followed. In the rear loitered Hargreaves, silent and watchful.

At the foot of the confining cliff, beyond the chaparral, a great balsam pine stretched high in majestic grandeur.

Along the course of the faint-rippling water, marigolds lifted their white heads, delicate wild crocuses peered from grassy beds, and the vivid yellow of alpine goldflowers gleamed in riotous profusion. Smythe-Jones knew the spot well, a vision of paradise in a somber, thirsty land. He had spent many an hour peacefully smoking at the foot of

the pine.

The 'breed stopped, pointed upward into the high branches. From a limb of the tree, head twisted at a grotesque angle, the still body of a *vaquero* swung at the end of a taut rope.

Carlos turned, eyes glittering. "That ees Sancho! I told eem to guard the canyon. The peeg let you pass!"

"You damned murderer!"

"Mebbe I 'ang you, too," grated the 'breed. "Yes, now my fren, we weel 'ave sport. You shall 'ang like Sancho, but slowly, verry slowly!" His voice rose. "Pedro, Hernandes, Compo!"

To the Englishman's ears came the sound of the *vaqueros* crashing through the brush. Then another voice broke the tension, cold and unemotional.

"I got the drop on yuh, Carlos. Turn 'em!"

The 'breed spun around, Hargreaves' gun was leveled, hip-high. Smythe-Jones heard the hammer click back.

"Yuh ain't got long!" reminded the Texan flatly.

Carlos' contorted features suddenly relaxed. He smiled—like a wolf, thought Smythe-Jones. "You geet me wrong, Beel. Eet ees so funnee!"

"A slug ain't funny. Shoo 'em back!" reiterated Hargreaves stonily.

The 'breed, chuckling, shouted to the approaching *vaqueros*. The crackling of brush receded as they returned to the clearing.

"Now get this, boss." Hargreaves still held his gun on Carlos. "I don't aim tuh buck yuh so long as yuh pay off, but nix on stringin' up the Limey."

"Sure, Beel!" The 'breed's voice was silky. "It was what you call 'eem, a beeg joke. Me, I'm your fren. We are all frens together!"

Reluctantly, the puncher holstered his iron. His right arm remained crooked for a quick draw.

"Suits me!" he drawled.

In the days that followed, the episode of the attempted hanging was apparently forgotten. Smythe-Jones again merged into the now-familiar routine—rustling by night and branding by day. Meanwhile, the canyon in which the cows were held until the changed brands healed was again filling.

"We haid another bunch fer the railroad at sunup," Hargreaves told the Englishman one evening.

"Surely I am not included?" questioned Smythe-Jones incredulously.

"Yep!"

"But didn't friend Carlos object?"

"I got the bustard over a barrel," returned the puncher with a tight grin. "Ain't a Mexican in the gang got savvy tuh handle a trail herd. I told him yuh'd string along or I'd stick around. Ef yuh ride back this trip, Limey, you're shore crazy."

"And leave you to face the music alone!"

"It don't faze me none," said Hargreaves indifferently. "I'll git him afore he gits me."

IN THE gathering gloom, a girl mercilessly spurred her pony across the benches toward the CCC. At the silent ranchhouse she slipped hastily out of leather, ran up the porch steps and hammered upon the door with a small fist. Brazos rolled out of the bunkhouse on bowed legs.

"Ain't no one around, Miss Kincaid," he bawled, " 'cept me and the Chinee."

"I must get word to Mr. Jones, immediately," she panted.

"Cain't be done, ma'am. The Limey done fired the crew and drifted. Mebbe he's in Arizona."

"He's with Carlos Compana at the OOO," she flashed back. "And that horrible half-breed plans to murder him!"

"Yuh—don't—say! Gee willikers! How come he strayed inter thet den of coyotes?"

The girl stamped her foot impatiently. "I'm not concerned as to how he got there. He's there and his life is at stake. We must warn him, somehow. Couldn't you sneak into the OOO?"

"Not me, ma'am," replied Brazos hastily. "Not with a pack of greasers jest itchin' tuh slit my gizzard."

"You'd hang back and let a brave man die because you're afraid to risk your precious skin!" Her voice dripped contempt.

Brazos shifted his chaw uneasily. "Quit proddin', ma'am," he returned weakly. "Them chili-eaters u'd butcher me like a fatted calf, and thet won't help the Limey any." An escape from

his predicament occurred to him. "Le's go see Tim Coghlan," he suggested. "Tim's a ringtailed bobcat in a tight."

"But he's in jail!"

"They's a passel of CCC waddies loose around town, ma'am. They'd ride tuh hell fer Tim."

When they reached the jail, the CCC foreman's eyes opened wide with surprise at sight of the girl who had confessed to the murder of the man he was accused of killing. Wonderingly, he approached the bars. Brazos pushed forward.

"Limey's in a jackpot," he said shortly. "He done drifted inter the OOO and the gal claims he's due tuh check out."

"How come, ma'am?" Tim eyed the girl's pale features.

"Carlos Compana told me this evening, when we were riding together. Mr. Jones has joined his gang. Why, I cannot understand." She spoke swiftly, her voice tense. "Tomorrow the OOO is trailing a herd of stolen CCC cows to the railroad. Mr. Jones will be one of the crew. Two *vaqueros* will pick a quarrel with him, somewhere out in the wilds, and knife him. He won't have a chance, he is unarmed. That horrible half-breed boasted about it."

Tim's voice was brusque. "Yuh tole the sheriff?"

"N-no," she choked. "After what occurred at the Boxed B, he'd never believe me."

"Carlos around town?"

"He rode back to his ranch."

"So Hyphen jined up with the rustlers," murmured Tim. "I gamble he figgered he'd git the deadwood on Carlos, the doggoned crazy Limejuicer! Now the greaser's due tuh trump his ace." His voice rose. "Yuh hit fer home, ma'am," he said kindly. "Hyphen ain't cold meat yet. Mebbe we kin ease the lunkhead outta this jackpot."

Hope shone in the girl's tired eyes. "Oh, if you only could!" she breathed.

"We'll make a doggone good stab at it," grunted the foreman. "Now beat it, ma'am. I gotta figger things."

The two men watched the girl's slight form merge with the shadows outside.

"What'll I do?" demanded Brazos. "Git the boys t'gether?"

"And tip your hand? Ten tuh one Carlos is casing the town. Nope, I gotta handle this alone. Lemme see," he muttered. "The trail herd u'll pull out at sunup fer Carson Wells. Fust night—thet's t'morrow night—they'll lay over at Coyote Spring. Ain't no other water. I kin make it tuh the Spring afore sunup. Hell, it's a cinch!"

"Yuh plumb fergot this," drawled Brazos, and rattled the locked cell door.

Tim grinned. "Gimme yore gun." Brazos passed the weapon between the bars. "Now drift! Tell Bull I crave tuh see him, urgent. Then hightail fer the livery. Saddle the roan and hold him behind The Bull Pen. Git thet straight?"

Brazos grunted.

"Wal, split the breeze. And remember, if Dan Harris lamps thet roan we're sunk!"

Minutes later Tim, having overpowered Bull and locked him in his cell, joined Brazos in the darkness behind The Bull Pen. Suddenly a curt challenge cut through the night.

"Hold it, gents!"

There was no mistaking the sheriff's crisp tones.

In a flash, Tim was astride the roan. Shadowed beside him, Brazos sat tight, paralyzed by the challenge from the night. "Hightail!" blurted the foreman.

AS HE spoke, he jammed a rowel against the rump of the old puncher's pony. Like a released spring, the animal leaped ahead, bounding northward. Tim wheeled, leaned low across the roan's neck, gave it the spur and streaked in the opposite direction.

Red spurted from the rear of The Bull Pen. A slug whined beneath the outstretched neck of his racing pony and the boom of a six-gun hit his ear. Another roar, more distant now, and a bullet droned above his shoulders, flat against the roan's withers.

"Shootin' by ear and he most nicked me," Tim told his mount. "Thet's Dan Harris! Wal, ef he had cat's-eyes, I'd be cold meat. Thank Gawd he cain't see in the dark, and he shore cain't tail us both. Mebbe he'll take after Brazos."

By now, his flying pony had carried him out of range of the sheriff's shotgun. Shanties and adobes flowed past,

then the pony was thudding across the crisp prairie grass.

The foreman reined down, halted. Head turned, he listened for pursuing hoofbeats. But no sound came from the huddle of buildings clustered in his rear, save for the distant "Yippee!" of a drunk and the faint yelping of dogs.

"So Dan took after Brazos," he pondered. "Ef thet old mossyhorn holds the pace, they won't corral him fer an hour. Which gives me time aplenty tuh vamoose." He kneed the roan to a trot, bearing westward.

Dawn illumed the lofty crags when Tim rode into Coyote Spring. If the girl's story was straight, the herd would leave Carlos' hideout at sunup, which meant they would not reach the spring before midafternoon or maybe sunset. So he had hours to kill.

He watered the roan, gathered dry dung and kindled a small fire. Hunkered by the cheerful glow of the flames, he skinned a cottontail he had knocked down in the hills, skewered it on his jackknife and browned the meat. He tore it apart with his fingers, ravenously devouring the half-raw flesh. Mountain air sharpened a man's appetite. Then he took a drink of water, relaxed against a boulder.

The warming sunlight crept down the mountainside, hit the spring. Tim, who had not rolled in his blankets for twenty-four hours, slid down to full length, drowsily tilted his Stetson over his nose and drifted off to sleep.

It was noon when he awoke, too late to see a questing *vaquero* whirl his pony and gallop northward.

He rose and stretched with a yawn. The roan was cropping the few blades of grass that struggled for life in crevices around the spring. Conscious of an emptiness within, he searched his saddle-bags in the hope of salvaging some forgotten biscuits, and found no more than a spare shirt, glasses, and a tallow-sealed cartridge case of matches. He eyed his feeding pony enviously.

"Wisht I was a hoss!" he said.

Then he lay flat by a pool and took a long drink. The sun's rays were scorching, now. He stripped off shirt and bandana and laved his head and shoulders.

Drying himself with the shirt, he saw the pony's head come up, ears pricked. He shrugged quickly into the shirt and moved toward his mount, scanning the emptiness around.

A mile distant, clear in the crystal air, four riders rounded the flank of a ridge, moving fast. As he watched, they spread. Three pulled down to a trot, the fourth thundered toward him. Tim eased his gun in the holster.

Hargreaves pulled up his hard-breathing pony a dozen paces distant. Tim, covered by his mount, had the advantage and he guessed the stranger knew it.

"Howdy!" he drawled.

"Ridin' through?" asked Hargreaves laconically.

"Nope, jest settin' around."

"Expectin' someone?"

"Mebbe."

Poker-faced, Hargreaves considered this, slitted eyes measuring the man before him. His first glance had registered the CCC brand on the pony's flank.

"Better drift, *amigo!*" he warned bleakly. "The climate's kinda unhealthy around these parts."

"Whar would yuh drift," asked Tim, with a faint grin, "ef yuh was on the dodge?"

"Yuh ain't Tim Coghlan, held fer the Boxed B killin'?"

"The same."

Hargreaves turned in the saddle, fired curt orders in Spanish at the other riders. They wheeled, bunched and cantered northward.

The OOO *segundo* piled out of leather, tugged out his sack of makin's. "They call me Bill. Gotta pard of yourn in the crew—a Limey."

"He in good shape?"

"Spry as a two-year-old."

"Ef he ain't, mister, yuh better grease thet gun hand!"

Hargreaves eyed the foreman curiously, chuckled. "So thet's how it is? Wal, yuh and me are settin' on the same side of the fence."

X

LIKE a huge dun snake, the herd wove across rock-littered benches, curling upward toward the spring. At scent

of water, the leaders quickened into a clumsy trot. Flanked by swarthy *vaqueros,* they came on with a roar and a rumble, the deep thunder of their bellowing punctuated by the sharp clack of clashing horns.

Hunkered, the two cowmen eyed their approach. With a sharp oath, Hargreaves crushed his cigarette and jumped to his feet.

"Look at them doggoned dagos!" he rasped. "Them cows u'll pile up, surer'n hell. Might jest as well hire a crew of jackasses!"

Tim was up beside him. He, too, sensed the imminence of disaster. The bawling herd was now approaching at a gallop. The column had broken. In a few minutes the trail-worn, thirsty brutes would madly stampede, choking the basins and crushing each other in a blind, frantic fight to reach water.

The pair ran to their ponies, flung into leather and spurred toward the oncoming cows. Yelling and waving their Stetsons, they raced beside the leaders, pushing them away from the spring. *Vaqueros,* superb horsemen, shot out of the confusion, tailed the two riders, helping divert the torrent of beef. Gradually the stream of half-crazed cows circled, slowed and milled.

Hargreaves set guards and headed for the spring with the remainder of the crew. A tanned, dust-smothered rider reined up beside Tim.

"Pardon me, my dear sir," he drawled, "but you should be in jail. Are you a fugitive from justice, or has the killer confessed?"

The CCC foreman's rugged features creased in a grin. "Say, Hyphen, you're shore the spit of a regular cowhand. I had yuh figgered fer a Mexican in thet fancy sombrero. How come yuh turned rustler? And why in thunder do yuh hev tuh grab yore own beef?"

Smythe-Jones' left eyelid dropped. "Thereby hangs a tale, which shall be told in due season. Curiosity still consumes me. Is the lynx-eyed sheriff hot upon your trail?"

"Wal," admitted Tim thoughtfully, "I figger I give him the go-by. Now lissen, Hyphen." And he told of the knifing scheme.

"And you broke jail to warn me?"

"Fergit it!" growled the foreman.

"I shall not forget it," replied Smythe-Jones warmly. "This Western country breeds men one is proud to know. Now, about this beastly knifing. We should consult Hargreaves."

"Kin yuh bank on thet frozen-faced *segundo*?"

"Positively, old boy, to the limit. And, by the way, how on earth did you become acquainted with the excellent Carlos' plans?"

"He run off at the mouth to a gal."

"Not Mildred Kincaid?"

"Yuh bet! She hightailed fer the CCC, raised hell with Brazos. The old mossyhorn was in a tight, so he hit fer the jail, with the gal in tow. And she warn't content till I give her my word we'd ease yuh outta the jackpot."

"The blessed girl!" murmured Smythe-Jones, his eyes radiant. "Do you know, old fellow, you have brought me happiness supreme. I feel regenerated, reinvigorated. Why, this is marvelous!" He turned to the trail boss. "Would it be asking too much, old boy, for a spell on guard duty tonight? Possibly Tim could ride with me, to counterbalance my ineptitude."

"Shore," replied Hargreaves carelessly, "ef you want it thet way. You two jaspers take the graveyard shift. I'll be around," he added curtly.

"I was counting upon that," said the Englishman.

That night, shaken into wakefulness by Tim, the Englishman drowsily stumbled in the wake of the foreman toward the ponies. Half a mile distant, the irregular black mass that was the herd rested quietly. Two horsemen were slowly circling. As if at a signal, every cow rose to its feet, moved forward a dozen paces and bedded down again.

"What on earth aroused them?" demanded Smythe-Jones, as the two walked their ponies away from the sleeping camp.

"Guess they heard yuh yawnin'," chuckled the foreman, "or mebbe they got stiff at the joints. Leastways, they allus move at midnight."

At sight of their relief, the night guards pulled away from the herd, eager to stretch out and snatch some sleep.

"Now, what's the big idea, yankin'

me outta my beauty sleep?" demanded Tim, when the *vaqueros* had vanished into the darkness behind them. "We don't hev tuh stand night guard."

"Finesse, my boy. Beastly uncomfortable, but necessary. When Hargreaves joins us, and I think he took the hint, we shall have opportunity to discuss ways and means without eavesdroppers."

SCARCELY had they completed the first circle when the trail boss drifted up silently. "Figgered yuh'd stampede 'em," he commented. "It's yore beef."

The Englishman smiled. "The situation has possibilities, but my request for night guard was merely a stratagem in order that we three may talk together. You enlighten friend Hargreaves, Tim."

The CCC foreman again told of the contemplated knifing.

"Gordamn thet yeller rattlesnake!" growled Hargreaves. "Wal, mebbeyuh'll take my tip and beat it now, Limey. With thet sidewinder on one flank and the sheriff on the other, yore chances around the OOO don't amount to a hoot in hell."

"That's exactly what I intend to do," the Englishman assured him. "But I'd feel considerably easier in my mind if you came along, too." His voice sobered. "Break away from this damnable pack of thieves, Bill, now while there is yet time. I give you my word, the days of Carlos Compana are numbered."

"And whar'll I drift?"

"Oh, we'll all be jolly fugitives together."

Hargreaves was silent, pondering. "Nope," he decided finally. "I'll deliver the herd."

"You'll never collect, Bill," warned Smythe-Jones earnestly. He leaned forward and impulsively grasped the puncher's arm. "I guarantee you won't lose, financially. This OOO scum is no fit company for a man of your type."

"I'm stickin'!" grated the *segundo*. "I got a job tuh do and I gotta see it through. Mebbe later, Limey. Wal, so long!"

Abruptly, he wheeled his pony. The two watched as he rode away and slowly dissolved into the darkness, a stubborn, solitary figure.

"There rides a good fellow, a nugget in the rough," said the Englishman soberly, "and I fear he rides to his death. Well, Tim, let us remove ourselves."

"Whar we hittin' fer?" Tim demanded.

"The CCC, old fellow—to rest, refresh, and formulate plans which I am confident will result in the discomfiture of our unworthy friend."

The light of a new day paled the eastern horizon when the two riders reached the home ranch. As they dismounted, the lean form of the sheriff materialized. Tim impulsively reached for his gun.

"Yuh jerk thet iron and I'll bore yuh!"

The foreman shrugged. His hand dropped away from the butt of his gun and he bent to loosen a cinch. Dan slipped the foreman's gun out of the holster, jammed it beneath his waistband.

"What in hell got inter yuh, breakin' out thetaways?" he inquired caustically.

"Cain't I stretch my laigs?" grunted Tim.

"Yuh kin stretch yore laigs plenty from now on, pacing a cell. And no visitors!"

"Don't see no signs of Brazos around," commented Tim.

"Yuh won't. The old coot's in the cooler. How come Miss Kincaid dropped in tuh say howdy?"

"Guess the gal jest felt friendly," replied the foreman shortly. "Let's go, Dan."

* * * *

Restlessly, Smythe-Jones fidgeted around the silent spread. He itched for action, excitement, anything but solitude. So the sight of a rider toiling up the trail brought welcome diversion. Brazos rode in.

"The crew's acomin' back," he announced. "Tim's orders, and he sez fer yuh tuh handle 'em. Yuh wrangle too many fancy words, sez Tim. Use yore fists, thet's a langwidge CCC waddies savvy."

"And when may I expect the crew?" Smythe-Jones inquired.

"They're acomin', boss, right now."

A dust cloud billowed across the benches. In its forefront raced a com-

pact bunch of riders. Like a cyclone, they hurricaned around the house, burst into the yard with a thunder of hoofs and shrill yippees. Finally, the dust settled. Saddles were raked and ponies corralled. Smoking and bantering, the crew drifted into the bunkhouse by twos and threes. One swung a full bottle of bourbon at arm's length.

Smythe-Jones moved toward the bunkhouse and stood in the open doorway. Half a dozen waddies were already gathered around the plank table in the center of the room. One shuffled a greasy pack of cards. The bottle, half empty, sat on the table. Others lounged idly around.

"Welcome home, boys!" said the Englishman, blandly.

A puncher near the door stared at him, then looked away. Smythe-Jones' blue eyes froze. He strolled into the bunkhouse, stopped by the table, stretched a long arm over a seated waddie's shoulder, grasped the whisky bottle, raised it high and shattered it down upon the table.

DEAD silence succeeded the crash.

"I see that I have your attention," commented the Englishman curtly. "Now, kindly listen. I will have no whisky upon this ranch and no card-playing during working hours. You six men"—his pointed forefinger circled the table—"saddle up! I want our stuff pushed back from the west boundary. The rest of you will ride with me at nightfall. I will post you along the line. We will return to the ranch at dawn. Any questions?"

"Yep, I gotta question, dood!" A heavy-shouldered young rider, with red hair, rose from beside the table. "Why shouldn't I bust hell outta yuh fer breakin' up our card game?"

"No reason at all, my good fellow, except that you are not equal to the task."

The redhead kicked back his chair. He spat on his hands and measured the tall Englishman. Big, bony fists knotted, he moved forward.

"I'm gonna climb yore hump!"

"Tromp him, Red!" yelled a lithe, dark-featured puncher.

Smythe-Jones dropped into a slight crouch, poised upon his toes. His arms were slightly flexed, his fists clenched loosely. The rawboned redhead loosed a haymaker at the Englishman's jaw. Smythe-Jones side-stepped, laid a hard left alongside his opponent's jaw.

The force of the blow rocked the redhead. He shook his head angrily, again plunged with swinging arms. He hit nothing but air. Like a shadow, the Englishman darted in and out, his bunched fists flicking into the other's face and torso. Yells and shouts flurried around the bunkhouse as Red's fists whirled and the Englishman calmly chopped him to pieces.

Then, for the last time, Smythe-Jones' wicked left shot out. Red's head snapped back and he thudded to the floor.

The Englishman gazed apologetically at the circle of blank faces. "I know it's murder, but the bally fool was wide open."

Red stirred, spat blood and sat up, staring in bewilderment. Voicelessly, he swayed to his feet.

"I suppose you'll want to quit," said Smythe-Jones. "Well, you'll find a month's pay at the office. That's for being game. I won't pay anyone else here another damned cent."

The redhead mopped the blood from his torn lips.

"Hell, boss," he came back, with a twisted grin, "we ain't quittin', we're ridin' . . . Git a wiggle on, you jaspers!"

Two mornings later, at sunup, the boss of the CCC stood on the ranchhouse gallery and, with deep content in his eyes, watched his riders jingle out, two by two, into the hills. A little later Smythe-Jones crossed the yard and headed for a stand of spruce well back behind the outbuildings. Here, a rough barn had been built, surrounded by a pole corral, wherein was housed the fabled Penelope and her family.

Smythe-Jones saddled and bridled the shaggy beast, clambered aloft and dropped down the trail toward Cactus, his thoughts revolving around a certain shapely young lady. No longer were Mildred Kincaid's sentiments toward him in doubt. Had she not braved Carlos Compana's vengeance to save his life? This time, he determined, she would go riding—and listen to some very im-

portant things he had to say.

An hour later, with twinkling eyes, Smythe-Jones swept down the main street of Cactus, oblivious to the curses of punchers clinging to the heads of kicking, snorting ponies at the hitch-rails. Leaving behind a rank aroma and a chorus of profanity, he hit the stage road north of town, wheeled off at the McCleod Schoolhouse. Ducking thresh-ing tree branches, he moved up the draw toward the house.

At the front porch he dismounted, se-curely knotted Penelope's reins around a corner post, mounted the steps and tapped briskly at the door. There was no response.

Faintly puzzled, Smythe-Jones round-ed the building and turned the knob of the back door. It was bolted. A small horse barn stood amid the trees. He crossed to it and poked his head through the open doorway. The barn was empty.

A dark object on the mat of trampled straw caught his eye. He picked it up. It was a woman's gauntleted riding glove. Around it a broken shoelace was tightly knotted.

Smythe-Jones frowned at the leather glove, thrust the glove into a pants pock-et and returned to the cabin. He ran up the porch steps, raised his leg and smashed the sharp heel of his riding boot against the lock.

Woodwork splintered, the door swung open. Smythe-Jones was pushing eager-ly through the doorway when a cool voice behind him drawled, "I figgered on arrestin' yuh fer hazin' thet hunk of stink through town. Guess I kin add housebreakin'!"

The Englishman gestured impatient-ly and disappeared inside. The front door opened on the living room. It was in disorder. A circular table was over-turned, a smashed chair lay beside it. The gay-patterned rug was askew, dark-ened with a circle of split kerosene and littered with fragments of what once had been a glass-bowled lamp. And in the corner lay a great Bible with black, shabby covers.

XI

FROM the doorway, Sheriff Harris' shrewd grey eyes flicked over the scene of confusion. The Englishman swung around toward him.

"That damned Mexican has been here! He has carried her away!"

"Yeah?" returned Dan.

Smythe-Jones pulled the glove from his pocket. "Look at that, dropped in the barn. The poor girl couldn't leave a written message, but she was quick-witted enough to drop this symbol. What does it tell?"

"Snatched and bound," said Dan la-conically.

"And do you know why?"

"The gal spilled Carlos' notion of knif-in' you."

Despite his perturbation, the English-man realized the significance of the sheriff's words. "By Jove," he ex-claimed, "how did you learn that?"

"I git around!' said Dan. He jerked his head toward the Bible. "Peter's on the trail. Jed Ritter found his mule in the livery corral this A. M., and the best chunk of hossflesh in the barn, Tim's roan, is missing. I been tryin' tuh figger thet one out." He turned and briskly dropped down the porch steps. "Wal, we gotta move fast ef we're gonna scotch thet rattlesnake."

Smythe-Jones tailed the sheriff as he stepped outside the cabin behind the Mc-Cleod Schoolhouse. Harris had tied his pony down the draw. He jingled briskly along the trail, mounted and disap-peared among the trees. The English-man stood on the porch uncertainly, eyeing Penelope.

Chances were, he considered, that Carlos had carried the girl off to the OOO hide-out in the canyon. It was a rugged trip, over a terrain with which numerous night forays had familiarized him. And it was the type of terrain over which a camel would outdistance a horse. All he needed was a weapon.

With grunting protest, the camel knelt. The Englishman slid into the saddle. Penelope swayed erect. Smythe-Jones moved down the draw, out upon the stage road. Ahead, the sheriff's galloping pony sprayed dust. Smythe-Jones held the camel down and followed at a safe distance.

Harris hitched his pony outside the courthouse and headed for his office. The Englishman, oblivious of the squeal-

ing, prancing ponies at the hitch-rails, hit for The Bull Pen.

Mac polished glasses behind the bar, alone. The Englishman tied Penelope, pushed through the batwings.

"I say, old chap," he cried, "the sheriff needs you, urgently!"

"Begorra! And what's wrong now?" ejaculated the saloon man.

Smythe-Jones shrugged. "I believe the charge is poisoning the populace at large," he murmured.

Mac snorted, draped the towel upon a peg, untied his apron and stepped toward the street.

The Englishman watched until his burly form disappeared from view, then vaulted the bar, grabbed the sawed-off shotgun and hastened outside. He loosed Penelope, mounted and urged the beast into its clumsy lope, heading southward. Clear of town, he swung westward, toward the frowning Smokies.

The sun still hung high when the racing camel padded between the gloomy portals of the canyon. Smythe-Jones reined it toward the patch of chaparral. Ahead, through the brush, he sighted a knot of *vaqueros* huddled around the cold ashes of the campfire. Few ponies were grazing across the canyon floor. It was apparent that the bulk of the crew had not yet returned from the trail drive.

In any event, the Englishman told himself, the swarthy followers of Carlos Compana still reckoned him one of the gang. He would deal with the 'breed first. They could be handled later.

Shotgun gripped in his fist, he swung past the startled *vaqueros*, dismounted outside the cabin and hastened inside.

The stench of burnt powder bit his throat. His head pivoted, and he jerked back with a gasp of horror. Peter lay upon his back, dark eyes focused in a glassy stare. A knife skewered his blood-soaked shirt. Across the room was another huddled figure. A glance told Smythe-Jones that Carlos Compana would never confess his sins.

But there was no sign of Mildred Kincaid.

SMYTHE-JONES hastened outside. The Mexicans watched him, crowded together like frightened sheep. He clicked back the twin triggers of the shotgun, praying that it was loaded. Gun waist high, he stalked toward the *vaqueros*.

"Where is the girl?" he demanded.

One of the Mexicans shuffled forward. "Yonder, senor, in the jacal."

"Has she been touched?"

"No, senor. By the Blessed Saints, I swear it!"

"Then go, all of you! The sheriff, with a posse, is on his way to hang every man-jack of you!"

The man turned to his subdued compatriots, words flowed from his lips. The group dissolved. With many fearful glances toward the canyon entrance, the Mexicans scrambled to catch their ponies.

Meanwhile, Smythe-Jones hastened toward the jacal the *vaquero* had indicated. It was a rude structure of interlaced boughs, with a low gap for a doorway. Bending, he stepped inside. Ankles lashed together with a rawhide riata, wrists bound behind her and a bandana wrapped around her mouth, Mildred Kincaid lay on the ground.

Tears flooded her eyes at sight of the Englishman. He dropped upon his knees, unknotted the bandana, cut away the rawhide ropes. Stiffly, the girl sat up.

"Oh, Hyphen!" she exclaimed.

The two words conveyed a volume of relief, gladness, bliss. His arms slid around her.

Three riders, trail-worn and bleak-eyed, loped into the canyon. Harris' pony, in the lead, snorted and crow-hopped as they crashed through the brush.

"Doggone it," growled the sheriff, "ain't we ever gonna git shut of thet stinkin' camel?"

Mildred Kincaid and Smythe-Jones rose from beside the jacal and walked serenely forward, hand in hand. Harris reined up beside the pair.

"Wal, whar's Carlos and the greasers?"

"Friend Carlos is resting, permanently." The Englishman inclined his head toward the cabin. "His villainous crew have vamoosed."

"You plug the jasper?" asked Dan.

"No. A better man than I," replied

Smythe-Jones tightly. "Take a look."

The sheriff and his deputies tied their ponies at a safe distance from Penelope and headed for the cabin. Harris bent over the Preacher's stark figure, eased the gun from Peter's slack fingers and examined it carefully.

"He drew on the greaser, but Carlos was a mite too slick," he commented.

"Not slick enough tuh dodge lead," cut in 'Pache caustically. "Look at this fer fancy shootin'!"

He indicated four bullet holes, close spaced, high and center on the hairy chest.

"Ain't bad fer a—preacher," agreed the sheriff slowly. "Le's git outside. The joint stinks!"

The three moved out into the open air. Smythe-Jones and the girl were wandering, aimlessly and blissfully, through the chaparral.

"The gal don't seem worried none about her paw," grunted Bull, watching them.

"Wal, I reckon St. Peter got a special seat up front reserved fer the old gent," rejoined 'Pache. "So what she got tuh worry about?"

"It don't seem natural."

"Hell!" exploded his fellow deputy. "Cain't yuh see the gal's in love?"

Smythe-Jones cut into their cross talk. "Well, gentlemen, the villain has been vanquished and our problems are miraculously solved." He advanced to meet them. "There should be some good bourbon in the cabin and the cook's jacal will yield excellent coffee."

Bull ran a tongue over dry lips. "Now you're talkin'!"

His eyes swiveled expectantly toward the sheriff.

"Nope!" decreed Harris inexorably. "No booze. Cawfee! Get the fire agoin', 'Pache."

While the deputies busied themselves around the fire, Smythe-Jones stepped close to the sheriff.

"You will, of course, release Tim, now that Carlos is dead."

"For why?" inquired Harris in a bland voice.

"Well, my dear fellow, isn't it perfectly plain that the Mexican was a thorough scoundrel?"

"Mebbe, but he didn't beef Bill."

The Englishman coughed. "Tut, tut, old chap, you speak very positively."

"I'm dead shore, mister."

MILDRED KINCAID sighed. "I was hoping that the death of that monster would solve all our problems."

"You should know different, ma'am," said the sheriff sharply.

Her troubled eyes met his, moved quickly away. The Englishman broke a strained silence.

"If you folks will pardon me, I'll tether my camel at a distance. It has an unfortunate aroma which is not conductive to appetite."

"Take it out and shoot it!" advised 'Pache over his shoulder.

"I may," returned Smythe-Jones.

The Englishman sauntered across to Penelope. High atop her hump, he crossed the clearing, with a cheery wave of the hand. Mildred watched his swaying form until it faded into the shadows that thickened across the canyon floor.

"You know—about yore paw?" inquired Harris gently.

She nodded.

"Want thet we should tote him back tuh town?"

She gazed sadly into the leaping flames of the campfire. "Yes. At least, he deserves Christian burial."

"Come and git it!" yelled 'Pache. He dipped mugs of coffee from a steaming pot, setting them upon a flat-topped rock. "Say, whar's the Limey?"

"Mebbe he's shootin' the camel," rumbled Bull, sipping his coffee.

The girl started nervously. "Oh, I hope he's not hurt! Anything can happen in this dreadful canyon."

"Rest easy, ma'an," advised the sheriff, rising. "I'll take a pasear over the flats."

He moved away from the fire, mounted his pony and jogged in the direction of the canyon entrance. Fifteen minutes later the little group around the fire heard the thud of his returning pony's hoofs. Eyes puzzled, he slid out of leather.

"The hombre's done vanished—complete!"

XII

WHEN the shadows swallowed him, Smythe-Jones turned southward, in the direction of Coyote Spring.

"Penelope, old girl," he said, "events have crowded us and we are compelled to exercise ingenuity." The camel groaned and slobbered. "You disapprove? Tut, tut! I am surprised. Allow me to lay the facts before you. If Bill Hargreaves and his crew of cutthroats ride into the canyon, our stalwart sheriff will undoubtedly arrest them. He will quiz the rascals, and one or more will inevitably break down and confess. Which will incriminate your humble servant and Bill Hargreaves. Rustling is a penitentiary offence. Embarrassing but true!

"Friend Hargreaves will also be confronted with that ancient murder charge. The worthy fellow may spend the remainder of his life in jail. Consider that, Penelope. Most unjust! Our duty is plain. We must intercept the homecomers and— For heaven's sake, stop slobbering! My pants are a beastly mess already!"

That night, Smythe-Jones slept beside the still, rock-girded waters of Coyote Spring. At dawn he was alert, scanning the trail that wound up to the Pass, notched high among the peaks.

Hours dragged. The sun climbed and the Englishman restlessly paced beside the pools. At last, headed by the poker-faced Hargreaves, the trail crew jogged into the spring.

"You still around?" grunted the *segundo*. "Figgered you'd hit the Border long afore this!"

Smythe-Jones smiled "Misfortune struck. Tim is again in durance vile, and the sheriff has taken over the OOO, lock, stock and barrel."

"Yuh don't say! Carlos beat it?"

"Carlos is dead."

Smythe-Jones told of the kidnaping of Peter's daughter, the Preacher's vengeance and the visit of the sheriff. Hargreaves listened, deep in thought.

"So the OOO's washed out and hung up tuh dry!" He straightened, tossed aside his cigarette and grinned wryly. "Wal, heah goes a tumbleweed!"

"Roll on," smiled the Englishman, "toward the CCC."

"What's the CCC tuh yuh? Yuh sold 'em out!"

Smythe-Jones smiled. "Merely a stratagem, old top. You will understand later. I am now sole and undisputed owner, and I need a good foreman."

"I wouldn't want tuh ace Coghlan out, seein' he's in the cooler," returned Hargreaves slowly.

"Tim's future is well taken care of. If he wishes to return to the CCC, suitable arrangements will be made."

Hargreaves hesitated, weighing the Englishman's words. "I'm shore thankin' yuh, Limey," he said at length, "but ain't yuh forgettin' the sheriff? He'll likely set me in the hoosegow.'

"Where is his evidence, my dear fellow? When he arrived at the canyon there was not a cow in sight. The *vaqueros* had vanished. Carlos was dead." Smythe-Jones jerked his head toward the swarthy riders hunkered in the shade. "You should be able to disperse these men. When they disappear, the evidence disappears with them."

The *segundo* chuckled. "You got it all figgered out." He jingled across to his followers. "*Atencion!*"

There followed a flow of fluent Spanish. Bewildered, the *vaqueros* flung questions. Hargreaves lifted a coiled rope, fashioned a noose, and pointed toward a distorted timber-line pine.

"*Vamos,*" he grated, "or hang!"

Jabbering, the Mexicans broke into gesticulating groups, straggled toward their ponies. Soon they were headed west.

"Another chapter ended," commented Smythe-Jones to Hargreaves. "Tomorrow a clean page, a fresh start and, I trust, a more propitious future."

AT SUNUP, further search revealing no trace of the Englishman, Harris and his party pulled out for Cactus. With them went the body of Peter the Preacher, lashed to the roan.

"Don't fret about thet Limejuicer," advised 'Pache, as Mildred rode in silence, concern in her eyes. "I never met one yet that warn't loco. Ten tuh one, he hit fer town. Right now, I gamble he's settin' in The Bull Pen, swillin' bourbon."

At noon they rode into town. The girl headed for her cabin. Harris led the roan with its gruesome burden over to the shed that served as morgue behind the Valley Merchandise Store. His deputies hit for the saloon.

When the pair wandered back to the office, there was no sign of the sheriff.

"We gotta trail him," declared 'Pache darkly. "Mac swears the Limey lifted his scatter-gun. It don't look good."

They finally cornered Dan in the morgue. He had just finished shaving the whiskers off the stiffened form of Peter the Preacher.

"Wal, I'll be doggoned!" ejaculated 'Pache. "Ef this ain't the last straw, shavin' a stiff! Yuh drunk or loco, Dan?"

"Neither," grunted the sheriff "Look-at that!"

The squat rider craned forward. Along the dead preacher's clean-shaven jaw a blue bullet scar, long healed, was etched into the flesh.

" 'Pears it ain't the fust time he smelt gunsmoke."

"Thet's jest what I was aimin' tuh find out. Wal, I gamble Peter's the first hombre from Cactus tuh step up tuh the Pearly Gates with a clean shave."

He closed the razor and led the way back to his office, where he hooked his ring of keys out of a desk drawer. Crunching to the jail, he swung open the door of Tim's cell.

"Beat it!" he grunted.

A delighted smile spread over the CCC foreman's craggy features. "Yuh ain't springin' me, fer keeps?"

"Till I jug yuh fer drunk and disorderly, and thet won't be long."

"Carlos confessed?" inquired Tim.

"Nope, he's daid. Preacher plugged the sidewinder."

Open-mouthed, the foreman swung round. "The preacher! Fer gosh sakes, spill the yarn afore I bust!"

"Ain't much tuh tell." Harris narrated the story of the abduction and double killing.

"So thet rattlesnake won't never be strung up fer Bill Boulderson's bushwhackin'," commented Tim gloomily.

"The 'breed never beefed Bill."

"Wal, who the hell did?"

The sheriff smiled slowly. "Yuh'd be surprised!"

The CCC crew was at supper when Tim Coghlan strolled into the cook shack. Heads swiveled, but there was no yell of eager greeting. Dead silence draped the two rows of waddies along the long pine table. Eyes sought expectantly the chair at the table's end—his chair.

Tim's muscles tightened as his dark eyes flickered over the occupant of the chair, the last man on earth he expected to meet at the CCC—Bill Hargreaves, Carlos Compana's *segundo*.

Hargreaves pushed the chair back, rose slowly. Like two belligerent bull terriers, they eyed each other across the room. Then Tim, heavy jaw outthrust, moved massively toward the man who had usurped his job.

CHUCK forgotten, the CCC waddies watched, eyes glinting with happy anticipation. At the farther end of the table, Smythe-Jones jerked to his feet.

"Stop him, you chaps!" he implored.

But no one had the inclination or the hardihood to try and stop Tim Coghlan when he was on the warpath.

Hard fists clenched, he flung himself at Hargreaves. The former OOO man met him with a wild yell. In an instant, the pair tangled in a blur of pounding fists and swaying bodies.

The Englishman bounded down the room.

"Listen, you silly blighters!" he howled, then staggered as Tim's hard shoulder caught him in the chest. "This simply can't go on!" he gasped, recovering balance. "They'll kill each other! Stand back, you fellows!"

Unwillingly, the circling waddies moved back. Smythe-Jones hovered around the pummeling pair, alert for an opening. For a moment, they broke apart, chests heaving. The Englishman's left pistoned into Tim's jaw.

As the foreman went down, Smythe-Jones whirled on his toes and sank his right into Hargreaves' solar plexus. He, too, toppled with whistling breath. The Englishman stood above the two inert forms and eyed them regretfully.

"At least I was impartial," he murmured. He turned to the clustering crew. "Carry Hargreaves to the bunkhouse. I'll handle Coghlan."

FOUR punchers hefted their new foreman's limp form, while Smythe-Jones sank into Hargreaves' empty chair. Tim stirred, sat up, ruefully fingering his jaw.

"I had to do it," apologized Smythe-Jones. "Verbal remonstrance was useless. Now listen to me, you fighting fool!" He wagged a long forefinger before Tim's bewildered eyes. "Your position is open, any time you want it. Bill Hargreaves was merely substituting during your regretted absence. But first, you are needed at the Boxed B. June Boulderson needs you, urgently."

"She in trouble?"

"Serious trouble, I am afraid."

Tim did not see the smile that hovered around the Englishman's lips. Already he was on his way.

Lights were aglow in the ranchhouse when he reached the Boxed B. He hastily slid out of the saddle, rapped imperatively at the heavy pine door and loosed his six-gun in the holster. The door opened and June Boulderson, calm and unruffled, stood before him.

"Why, Tim," she exclaimed, "this *is* a surprise! Come in!"

"Say, what's the trouble?" he blurted.

"Trouble?"

"Yep. Hyphen sez you needed me urgent."

June's smooth brow furrowed in bewilderment. Then it slowly cleared.

"Your Englishman is a very discerning person," she said softly. "I have wanted you—urgent—for a long, long time!"

* * * * *

The lank Englishman, a blue-eyed girl tripping blithely beside him, pushed open the door of the sheriff's office. "You wished to see me, old boy?"

"Yep. Set down, Miss Kincaid."

"Pardon me! Mrs. Frederick Willoughby—my wife," drawled the CCC boss, with elaborate casualness.

"So yuh got a new moniker, too!" grunted Dan Harris. "Mebbe yuh kin tell me whar yuh buried Gerald Smythe-Jones, when yuh grabbed his name and

[*Turn page*]

his spread. I got a murder warrant complete, except fer serving."

The new bride smiled fondly at her tall husband. "Oh, that's just another of Freddy's pranks. Tell him, Freddy!"

"It's really quite simple, Sheriff. I am, or was, a wanderer over the face of the earth. Itchy feet, doncher know. Served in the Sudan with the Camel Corps. Hunted big game in Rhodesia. Well, to cut the story short, I was en route to New York on the high seas, thoroughly bored, when I met the estimable Gerald. A puny little squirt, he was decidedly droopy. It appeared that his fond parents had presented him with a ranch in the wild and woolly West and insisted that he manage it, permanently. The poor fellow was heartbroken. He had no yen for cows and Indians. All he craved were bright lights and soft lips."

"Didn't show bad taste, at thet!" growled Bull from the corner of the office.

"Well, the idea of a ranch appealed to me. So, eventually, we made a dicker. I assumed his name and bought the CCC. He took my name and started life anew in New York. He's probably there yet, if he hasn't drunk himself to death."

"Yuh got a deed?"

"Rather."

The Englishman pulled a wad of papers from a pants pocket. Harris looked the documents over.

"What'll I write the jasper's parents?"

Willoughby shrugged. "Why bother to tell them? They'll hear from that dissolute puppy quickly enough when his funds are exhausted. Well, so much for the warrant!" He grinned. "Now, my wife has a confession to make."

The sheriff glanced at Mildred. " 'Bout Bill's killin'? Then save yore breath. Yore paw plugged Bill."

"Yuh never tole me!" snapped 'Pache irascibly from the background.

"Never knew, fer shore, till I shaved the old coot."

"This is really mysterious," murmured the Englishman. "Elucidate!"

XIII

THEY waited expectantly, while the sheriff slowly built a cigarette. "I had tuh figger motive, the motive thet drove yuh, ma'am, tuh ride hell fer leather tuh the Boxed B and throw down on Bill. Wal, it was fear. Right?"

She nodded.

"Bill was an old-time lawman and he had a yen fer collecting reward money. Yore Paw was Pete Pryor, Texas killer, a thousand dollars on his haid, daid or alive. Bill recognized him and threatened tuh turn him over—I'm shootin' blind now—unless he split the loot from the holdup of the Peace River Bank."

"That tainted gold is buried somewhere in Texas," she interrupted.

"Wal, Peter couldn't, or wouldn't, cut. Bill laid it down: pay up or hang! Yuh was scairt stiff they'd haul yore paw back tuh Texas and string him up. The more yuh chewed on it the more scairt yuh got, till yuh hit fer the Boxed B."

The girl shuddered.

"Wal, Pete got the same idea. It happens he Injuned up tuh the ranch when Tim was in the patio and yuh was argifying. The old coot was screened by the brush. He saw yuh draw, and fired too—tuh make a sure job of it, or mebbe tuh alibi yuh. He knew yuh toted a thirty-eight, and a forty-five slug in Bill's heart would let yuh out. Then he vamoosed and Tim rushed in—up tuh his neck!"

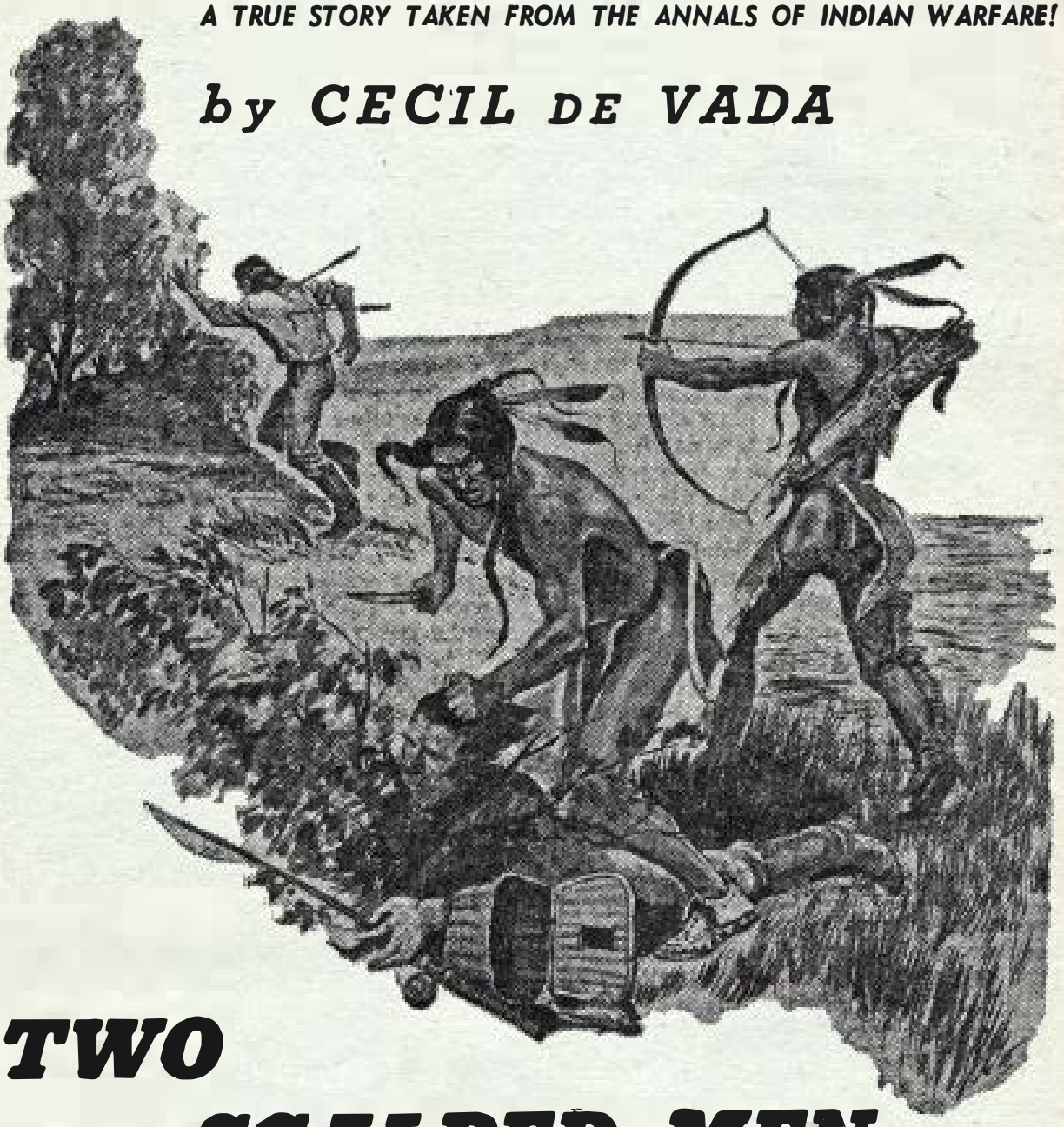
There was strained silence. Then Harris continued. "Wal, Carlos was coyotin' around. He lamped Pete makin' his getaway and he had yuh like thet!" The sheriff slowly clenched his fist. "The rattlesnake made a deal with yuh tuh lock his lips, providin' yuh treated him right. Later yuh tossed a gun tuh Tim in the hoosegow, after doctorin' the shells. Yuh didn't want no more killin'. Right?"

Again the girl's head jerked quickly. "But you haven't told the whole story." Her voice trembled. "Mother was a good woman, but she would have sold her soul for Dad. She was a young schoolteacher when they married. She knew he was wild, but she was sure she could reform him. But he was a born criminal and killer. I think he delighted in matching his wits and his gun against the law. He was always hiding, dodging, evading arrest. Mother followed him to hide-

(Concluded on page 153)

A TRUE STORY TAKEN FROM THE ANNALS OF INDIAN WARFARE!

by CECIL DE VADA



TWO SCALPED MEN LIVED

SCALPING an enemy, as practiced by both Indians and whites during the turbulent years of the West, was no gentle process. In fact, the shock and blood loss involved was enough to finish off a man who had not already been dead when the scalping was done.

As far as the records go, only two men are known to have survived this horrible experience of being scalped by Indians.

The first was an Englishman named William Thompson, a section foreman for the Union Pacific Railroad.

In the year 1867, Thompson and his five man crew were traveling by handcar on the tracks a few miles from Plum Creek

Station, Nebraska, which was about 230 miles from Omaha. For some reason, they were unarmed, evidently expecting no trouble of any kind with Indians.

Without warning, as Indian attacks usually come, they were surrounded by a small band of mounted Cheyenne braves. There was no battle as such, for the white men had nothing to fight with; it was a massacre. What happened to the others is not known, but Thompson's story is stark enough.

A shot from a rifle took him in the right arm. Trying to run, he dodged through the milling Indians, who slashed at him several times. Finally a blow from a wildly swung rifle knocked him down.

He was not unconscious, however, and in this condition he felt his hair suddenly gripped by the fingers of a big warrior who had leaped to stand astride him. The Cheyenne pulled his head up and his knife flashed in the sunlight.

What goes through a man's mind at a time like that no one can say. Perhaps only stark, frozen horror, during which time stands still and he can see and think only of that knife coming closer and closer. Thompson's own report is a model of terseness. "I felt," he said "as if the whole top of my head had been torn off."

The Indians, whooping in triumph, swung up on their horses and rode off. Dazed and blood-covered, Thompson was yet alert enough to notice that his scalp had dropped unnoticed to the ground from the belt of the Indian who had taken it.

When the Indians had disappeared, the scalped man dragged himself over to it and picked it up. Then he managed to climb to his feet and somehow staggered three miles to Willow Island, carrying his scalp.

There were white men at Willow Island and they took him in and bandaged his head, while they looked with dismay and horror at the scalp he was carrying. Finally someone suggested putting it in a pail of water to keep it from drying out.

The next day Thompson was taken to Omaha to see a doctor. The medico was much intrigued by the phenomenon of a man bringing in his own scalp.

"I never heard of this being done," he remarked, "but let's put it back on and see if it will grow together again."

The scalp was replaced and bandaged with this hope, but it didn't work. It didn't grow on. However, Thompson's head healed over in three months completely, except for a small spot on the left side. The hair follicles were permanently gone.

Months later Thompson returned to England and he took his dried and preserved scalp with him and had quite a vogue showing it to his astonished friends as a grim souvenir of the Wild West.

THE writing of the above story brings to mind how years ago an old Sioux brave on a South Dakota reservation gave a demonstration on this writer's head, of how scalps were taken in the old days.

The scalper simply made a circle cut with his knife around the victim's head, from just under the temple hair line to the back, and then with a quick strong jerk, tore the whole thing off. The operation didn't take over fifteen seconds for an experienced scalper, but the result was so terrible that there was little chance of the victim surviving it.

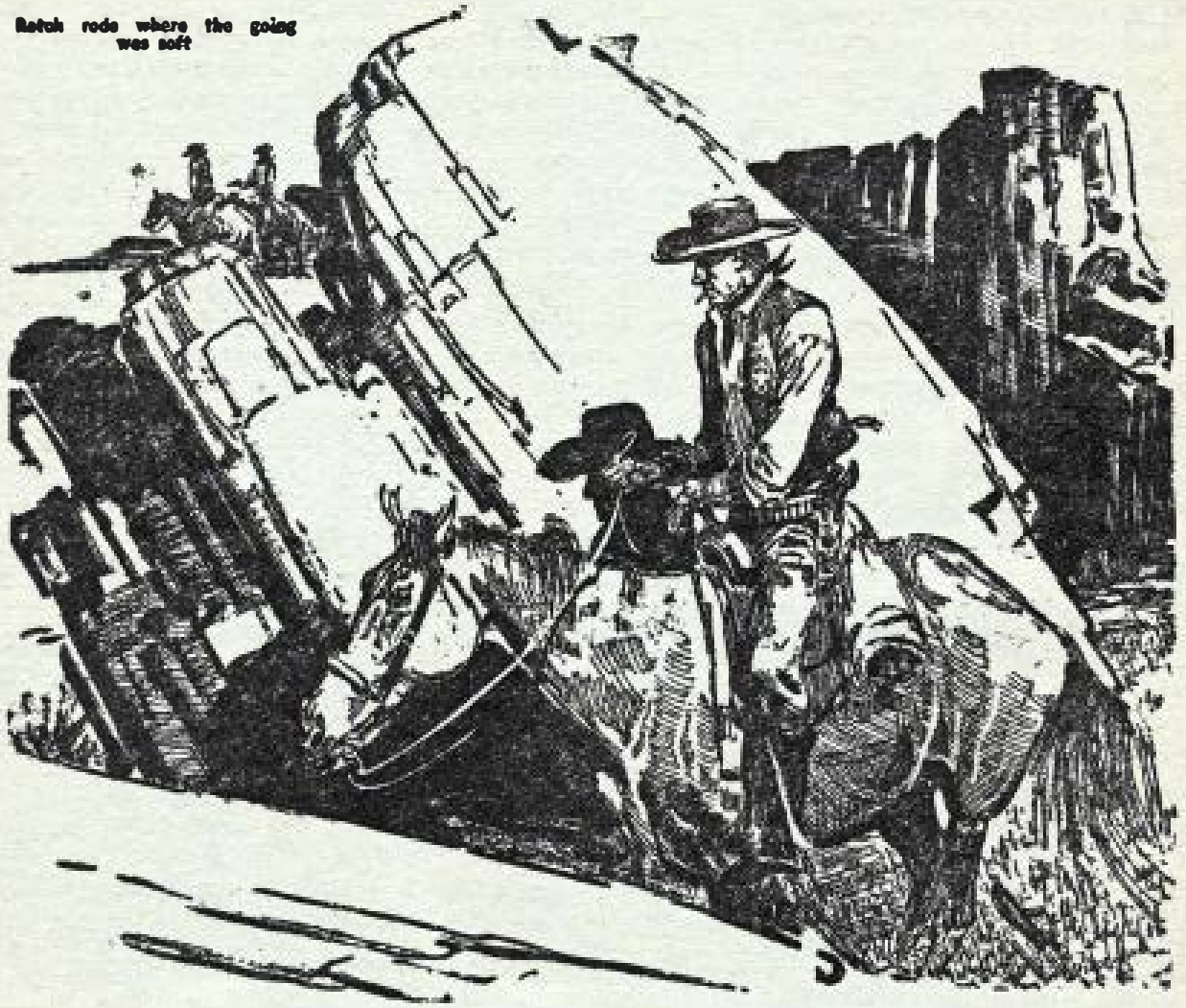
The second man to come through this ordeal, however, was a Union Pacific freight train engineer named Tom Cahoon.

On an April day in 1868, Cahoon and William Edmondson, another Union Pacific engineer, were fishing in Lodge Pole Creek, about two miles from Sidney, Nebraska, when they were surprised by six Sioux braves.

In the first flurry of gunfire, Cahoon was shot and dropped unconscious. Edmondson escaped those first bullets, and dropping his fish pole, leaped up to run. A flight of arrows followed him and three actually struck him in the back. Nevertheless he continued to run, arriving finally in Sidney with three arrows still sticking in his back. He lived, too.

Meanwhile Cahoon was seized and quickly scalped. The warriors were sure he was dead and left him lying there. But some time later he regained consciousness and despite his wound and the scalping, managed to make his way back to Sidney where he received medical treatment and also recovered.

In fact there was no serious impairment of his health for he continued to work as an engineer for the Union Pacific for years afterwards, operating out of Ogden, Utah. There is a street in that city, Cahoon Street, which is said to have been named after him.



Ratch rode where the going was soft

RED TRAIL TO DEATH

By RALEY BRIEN

Ranger Ratch rides the danger paths to save the life of a good man—and to capture outlaw "Jumper" Yoakum!

RANGER Joe Ratch was squinting as his keen eyes searched the rocky semiarid terrain far ahead where the heat waves danced. He was looking for a lifting trail of dust where none should be, to indicate where "Jumper" Yoakum, the outlaw, rode. Since an hour before dawn, Joe Ratch had been on Jumper's erratic trail.

Now, half sick with fatigue, Joe Ratch slouched to one side of his saddle and the hand holding his reins was relaxed. His neckcloth, pulled up over his mouth and nostrils to his eyes to keep out the fine sandy dust, was sodden with perspiration. His shirt was as wet with it as if the garment had been dropped into the watering trough beside the blacksmith shop

back in the village of Borderdale. Beads of perspiration trickled down his back and along the channels beside his spine to set his sensitive nerves on edge.

But he ignored all these discomforts as much as possible and concentrated on the problem confronting him. For he was riding in an attempt to save the life of a good man, and to bring in Jumper Yoakum to answer for his crimes.

The ranger's buckskin pony shied suddenly and caught Ratch unawares, almost unseating him. As the pony swung sharply to the right, his ears going up and forward, Ratch made three movements as one—he tightened the reins and swung the pony back, weighted his body on the stirrups and straightened, and sent his right hand in a lightning dart to the holster on his hip.

Clumps of dry brush and an occasional small rock around which the sandy earth had been packed by the wind—that was all for a couple of hundred yards around in any direction. No place for an ambush. An almost level terrain where a horse could not have been hidden from view. Otherwise, Ratch would not have been riding so carelessly.

Then he saw what had made the pony swerve so sharply. On a clump of dry brush, looking as if it had been driven there and plastered against the thorny vegetation by the raging morning wind seeking the desert's floor after a night in the hills, was a piece of paper about six inches square; the paper was red, blood red.

Ratch drew in his breath sharply. He was on the trail. Things Sarah Glane had told him in the hour of her excitement and fear returned to his memory. Yes, he was on Jumper Yoakum's trail!

HE QUIETED his pony, stopped him deadstill, bent from the saddle and examined the ground. The upper inch of that sandy earth was always being wind-shifted; but he could see remains of hoofprints, indentions half filled. So he could not be more than a couple of hours behind his quarry, else those prints would have been obliterated entirely.

There was no danger in the near vicinity, so Ratch reholstered his gun and gave his attention to the piece of paper that had frightened the pony. He spoke soothingly to the buckskin and compelled him to approach the clump of brush. Ratch stopped his trembling mount, bent from the saddle and got the sheet of paper.

Blood-red paper, a sheet about six inches square, with no writing on it, no weather stains, no streaks faded by the burning sun. A fresh sheet, so it had been there only a short time. Yes, he was on the trail at last.

He followed the trail for about half a mile without the least trouble, was able to follow it with fair speed. It ran across a depression where ridges of rock held back the drifting sand, and in some places the hoofprints were clear and distinct. And they ran toward the distant rocky hills whose serrated stone crests made a pattern against the burning sky. Ranger Joe Ratch had guessed right; Jumper Yoakum and his victim were traveling toward Devil's Canyon, where caves beneath overhanging cliffs and a boulder-studded canyon floor formed a natural habitat and gave advantage of position to men outside the law.

The pony shied again; and Ratch found another small square of blood-red paper. He got it and examined it—no message scrawled upon it, as he had hoped to find.

It dawned upon him then that Martin Glane, the outlaw's helpless prisoner, was trying to leave a trail to be followed by any who might essay a rescue. Those pieces of red paper showed this.

* * * * *

It had been about two hours before dawn when Ranger Joe Ratch had been brought out of his sound sleep by somebody pounding on the door of the shack wherein he slept, and by the shrill voice of Sarah Glane calling to him:

"Joe! Joe! Help, Joe! Joe, wake up!"

He finally struggled awake and shook his head and realized what was happening. He had been sleeping like a man far behind his schedule for normal sleep. On his regular patrol, he had arrived in Borderdale after dark the evening before.

If possible, he always managed to spend a night and day and a second night in Borderdale whenever his regular patrol brought him there. It gave him a chance to rest and rest his pony—and a chance to further his romance with Sarah Glane,

motherless daughter of Martin Glane, the small town's storekeeper.

He had been late getting in the night before. He had eaten at the Glanes' and then had gone to this little cabin behind the blacksmith shop, where he always bunked when in town. Now, at this predawn alarm, he yelled that he'd be there in a moment, and got into shirt and trousers and pulled on his boots. He buckled on his gunbelt as he hurried across the room to the door and jerked it open.

A bright full moon was riding the sky. He found Sarah before the door, a robe wrapped around her, slippers on her feet, her hair tousled, the ruffles of a nightgown showing at her throat. Evidently she had been shouting loudly in her shrill voice, for pounding boots told that a couple of men were running toward the smithy.

Out in front, at that instant, some man began beating a hanging wagon tire with the heavy sledge always waiting beside it—an alarm that would arouse the town.

"Oh, Joe—Joe!" Sarah cried, clutching at him.

"What is it, Sarah?" he asked. "Make quick talk."

Some men of the town had arrived now to listen to what she said.

"Oh, Joe!" Her voice was high with hysteria. "Something woke me up. I didn't hear Father snoring in his room next to mine—heard somebody at the corral—saw him riding away with a man. I could tell Father's wrists were tied to his saddlehorn. The man held a gun on him!"

"One of you see if Glane's pony is missing from the corral," Ratch barked at the small group of men. "See if mine is still there, too. Go on, Sarah."

"I saw a light was burning in the store, and hurried in there. Father had stayed up late—was still up when I went to bed. He wanted to finish wrapping the little souvenirs in those pieces of red paper."

THE ranger stopped her with a quick gesture of his hand.

"Souvenirs?" Ratch questioned.

"Oh, I forgot you don't know. Father sent to a novelty house in St. Louis for them—little gifts to give all his customers and friends during next month, because he started his little store here twenty-five years ago, just before I was born—"

"I understand, Sarah," Ratch interrupted. "Hurry and tell me what happened."

"I hurried into the store. One lamp was burning where father had been working at the counter wrapping the presents. The shades had been pulled down at the door and windows. The little squares of red paper were scattered over the floor as if they had been knocked there. And on the counter, I found this."

She handed Ratch a piece of white paper upon which some writing had been scrawled. By the light of the bright moon, Ratch could read the heavy scrawl:

I KNOW HOW TO SETTLE WITH THEM AS DO ME HARM. I'M TAKING GLANE AWAY, AND HE WON'T TESTIFY AGIN ME ANY MORE. AND I'LL GET THAT SMART RANGER BEFORE I'M DONE.

JUMPER.

"He's got Father, Joe! He'll kill Father!" Sarah was sobbing.

Joe Ratch passed the paper to the nearest man, so he could read it to others. He understood the situation. Some months before, Joe Ratch had caught the much-wanted Jumper Yoakum, who had earned his outlaw's sobriquet by jumping back and forth across the Mexican Line, dodging peace-officers on both sides. At Jumper's trial for robbery and murder, Martin Glane had been an important witness for the prosecution.

Jumper had been found guilty and sentenced to hang. The night before he was to be transferred to the state prison for execution, he shot his way out of jail with guns some friend had managed to get to him, killing a jail guard and wounding another.

And now, it appeared, Jumper Yoakum was trying to balance the scales, to his way of thinking, and his first victim would be Martin Glane.

Townsmen were gathering fast. Word flashed around about what had occurred. Ratch handed Sarah over to the tender care of a couple of motherly women and sprinted to the store.

A few things were knocked to the floor beside the counter, and the squares of red paper were scattered around, as Sarah had said. The rear door had been left

open. It appeared that Jumper had got in and caught Glane off guard, had simply marched him out to the corral and made him saddle and ride away with him, probably under threat of instant death.

Sarah had followed him into the store, and men and women had come after her.

"How was your father dressed?" Ratch asked her.

"As usual, except he had on boots instead of shoes. He had been working around the corral, fixing the fence, until it got dark. When he came to my room and told me he was going to finish wrapping up the souvenirs, he had on his coat, and its side pockets were stuffed with those sheets of red paper."

Some of the men began howling at Ratch:

"Let's form a posse. Somebody ride out and get the Rafter H punchers. Let's run the murderin' outlaw down and kill him!"

"Quiet!" Ratch thundered. "I'll run this. It's my job. A posse, even a small one, will raise dust that can be seen for miles. Jumper Yoakum would only laugh and outride it. This is a one-man job. If I can pick up the trail, I may get near enough to him alone to handle him."

And that was the way it had been. Sarah had indicated the direction Jumper had taken with his prisoner. Ratch found their hoofprints a short distance out of town. That was the direction in which they would travel if Jumper was making for the Devil's Canyon country.

HE HAD ridden on, losing the trail at times and picking it up again, had ridden through the moonlight, then the darkness before dawn, and through the early hours when the swirling mist was rising from the desert's floor just after the sun had come up. And now he had found two pieces of that blood-red paper Glane had been using to wrap up his cheap little souvenirs of his twenty-five years in business.

Glane had his coat pockets stuffed with pieces of the paper, Sarah had said. And now perhaps Glane was trying to leave a trail pursuit could follow by dropping pieces of the paper, which because of their color could be seen quite a distance. He must have caught Jumper off guard to do that now and then.

Ratch rode on, always watching ahead for puffs of dust where none should be, alert whenever he came to where an ambush could have been arranged. He followed the trail of hoofprints where he could, picked them up again when he lost them, and found another piece of red paper at intervals.

The trail was leading straight toward the mouth of Devil's Canyon. And once Ratch was sure he saw two moving dots passing among the distant rocks—dots he knew were mounted men. The red paper trail led on—a red trail to death it might be, Ratch was thinking. Possibly death for Martin Glane, or for him if he let Jumper Yoakum ambush him. It would be a day of triumph for Jumper if he could kill off the ranger who had arrested him and also the state's chief witness against him before he went back over the Mexican Line again.

Ratch came to a high level place where the wind had filled most of the hoofprints of the trail he was following. And here he found a plainer trail of the red paper, a piece of it on the ground or against a clump of brush every fifty feet or so. And that made the experienced ranger suspicious.

He analyzed the affair swiftly as he rode on.

Why had Jumper Yoakum kidnaped Glane and taken him away, when he had the opportunity of simply cussing him out, shooting him down in the store, and then hitting the trail?

Why had he not slipped up to the shack wherein Ratch had been sleeping and murdered the ranger in his sleep? He could have done both those things, then left a sarcastic note and ridden away. If he feared the first gunfire would arouse the town, he could have knifed Glane easily enough, and then gone on to the shack and killed Ratch.

The ranger knew that Jumper had a sort of superstitious fear of him. Ratch had a reputation of swift and accurate work with a gun, and for foolhardy courage. Why, then, had Jumper not ended the ranger when he had a chance? If the outlaw had been watching the town while planning Glane's abduction, he must have known Ratch was in Borderdale. Ratch followed a scheduled patrol, except when some emergency duty called him aside from the usual route.

It flashed into Ratch's mind suddenly now! A trap, a trick, a decoy!

He had been wondering how Glane had managed to drop that trail of pieces of red paper without Jumper seeing him. And he became convinced now that Glane had not done it—Jumper Yoakum had done it. Knowing the ranger was in town, Jumper had kidnaped Glane, left his note, had ridden away with his prisoner and left a paper trail Ratch could follow easily.

That was to decoy Ratch where he could be slain, perhaps after torture. And searchers later would find the bodies of Ratch and Glane, and Jumper would be over the line. For, from Devil's Canyon, the outlaw could cut through a narrow pass over the hills and get into Mexico without enduring a long chase where a pony's broken leg would have undone him.

That was it, Ratch decided, as he rode on. He was being decoyed.

No doubt Jumper had a long-range rifle with him. Ratch carried one in a saddle boot, too. But he had to have a target before he could shoot. And Jumper Yoakum could be in hiding in any one of a hundred ambush spots, to shoot Ratch out of his saddle before the ranger knew he was in the vicinity. It was a time for extreme caution.

Ratch rode on, but now he kept to the depressions in the earth and searched with his keen eyes the terrain ahead and to either side. His rifle was loosened in the saddle boot. His right hand hovered continually over the holster so a quick draw of his six-gun would be possible.

He went around the end of a long ridge of rock and came to where the wind swept down from the canyon and carried sounds to his ears. He had that slight advantage at least. A stream of lifting dust a distance ahead told him where Jumper rode with his prisoner, and also told him he had gained on the quarry.

Ratch swung wide around another ledge where the sandy dust was not so deep and started a wide circle toward the left. One thing Jumper Yoakum probably did not know was that he led the ranger into territory he knew extra well.

At least a dozen times since he had put on his ranger's badge, Ratch had been with posses that had combed Devil's Canyon for a fugitive. The queer jumble of rocks in the neighborhood was such that a stranger might soon find himself lost. There were scorces of caves, for instance, and natural rock chimneys that carried sharp drafts of wind, and echoes—and voices.

Ratch guessed the course Jumper was following from the trail he had followed so far. He swung out more to the left and came in from the side, keeping a towering shelf of rock between himself and where the others were riding.

He rode where the going was soft, where hoofs striking rocks would not betray his location. He found a place where a horse could be hidden well, a spot beneath the shelf of rock where there was some shade, and there he dismounted and ground-hitched his buckskin.

CARRYING his rifle in the crook of his left arm, Ratch went on afoot. Perspiration streamed from him as he went carefully up among the rocks. Heat waves danced around him, and his vision was blurred. He took each step with caution, for a boot striking a rock, a misstep that started a gravel slide would betray his presence.

And as he did all this he expected any instant to feel the smash of a slug into his body and immediately following the smash the report of a distant gun—possibly the last sound he would hear on earth.

At the top of the ledge of rock he flattened himself and looked below. He could see fresh hoofprints, and the dust was just settling over the trail horses had left. He knew, now, where Jumper had gone.

Twin caves, side by side, opened off a shelf of rock a distance below him. The approach was guarded and could be watched from the mouth of one of the caves. No rider could come along that narrow natural trail without riding beneath the gun of any man in the cave's mouth.

But Ratch knew how to get into the other of the twin caves afoot without being seen. He moved on cautiously. He knew there was a gap between the caves high up against the roof, that sounds passed from one cave to the other, that the thin rock wall between them was a sort of sounding board.

He got into the cave, stopped to listen. A mumble told him the outlaw was in the other cave, probably watching from the darkness of the mouth and awaiting his target. Ratch tiptoed cautiously back from the sunshine, blinking to adjust his vision to the semigloom. He walked until he reached a spot where he could hear the voices plainly.

"Thirsty, are you, Glane. Shucks. I ain't got any more water in my canteen than I'll need myself. I know where there's water a quarter of a mile from here, on through the canyon. But you'll never live to see it, Glane." Jumper's raucous laugh followed his speech.

"What are you goin' to do, Jumper?" Glane's voice was tired.

"The fool ranger followed, as I thought he would. That trail of red paper brought him. That was just my good luck. If it hadn't been for them squares of red paper, I'd have to have made a plain hoof-print trail, and that'd have kept me from gettin' so far ahead of him. What am I goin' to do? I'm goin' to blast the ranger, Glane, and then I'm goin' to finish you off and hit for Mexico. That plain enough?"

"They'll get you Jumper, in time."

"Not much afraid of that, Glane. I could have killed you both in Borderdale, but I'd have had to make a long hot ride for it afterwards, and anything can happen durin' a ride. This is the sure way. If I get a chance I'll torture that ranger some before I finally plug him."

"You won't get the chance, Jumper!" Those words were spoken in a loud stern voice. They were echoed among the rocks and rang along the wall of the cave where Jumper was hiding, where Glane his arms tied together, was a helpless prisoner.

Ratch had spoken the words against the rock wall so they were carried up and through the aperture near the roof. They rang down into the other cave like a sentence of instant doom.

Ratch heard boots striking rock, and knew Jumper Yoakum was whirling around, startled. "What the devil!" he heard Jumper roar.

"I've got you, Jumper!" Ratch's voice was stern as before. "Throw your rifle and six-gun over the ledge, then come out with your hands in the air!"

Jumper's wild laughter crashed against the rocks and went echoing down the canyon. "Toss 'em over the ledge and come out, huh?" he yelled. "So you're down below the ledge, huh? Try to come up and get me, then. Make one bad move at me, Ranger, and I'll shoot Glane."

"It's an easy job to shoot a man who's unarmed and maybe tied up," Ratch called in answer. "I'm the one for you to worry about, Jumper. The rope's waitin' for you. You're an escaped sentenced man. And you're wanted for killin' the jail guard, in addition. You're at the end of the trail, Jumper. Thanks for droppin' them pieces of red paper and showin' me the way to you."

AS THE echoes of his voice died away, Ratch heard Jumper Yoakum cursing in the other cave. Then footsteps sounded. and Ratch guessed Jumper was moving from the mouth of the cave out upon the ledge, that he would try to find a spot from which he could look down into the canyon, where he supposed Ratch to be.

He would have to pass the tiny round mouth of the second cave wherein Ratch was hiding. Ratch was hoping the wind had obliterated the tracks he had made while entering the cave. If it had not, if Jumper saw the tracks and guessed the truth, Ratch himself would be cornered, a prisoner in a cave from which he could emerge only by trying to shoot his way out.

Ratch knelt and brought up his rifle and drew a bead on the little circle of sunshine through which Jumper would have to pass to get to the lip of the ledge. He heard Jumper's slow shuffling steps. A shadow crept along the ledge. Then Jumper came into view, half bent over, rifle held ready.

"Freeze, Jumper!" Ratch barked. "You're covered!"

Jumper Yoakum whirled half way around, and found himself facing the little mouth of the cave. He guessed instantly that Ratch was in there. Perhaps he caught a glint of sunlight on metal as the barrel of Ratch's gun moved slightly. Jumper triggered his own rifle in a wild blast at the interior of the cave.

Ratch fired. One shot was enough at that range. Jumper Yoakum dropped his rifle, clutched at thin air, gave a scream

and toppled over the side of the ledge to the jagged rocks below.

Ratch hurried through the mouth of the cave and knelt and looked over. Jumper Yoakum, the wanton killer, was sprawled over a rock, face upward. Ratch knew he never would kill again.

"Joe! Joe! I'm in here!" Glane was calling in a weak voice.

Ratch hurried to him, cut the thongs that bound his arms behind him and held his legs together.

"So thirsty, Joe!"

"Take it easy," Ratch said. "My canteen's on my saddle, but we'll get it soon. Jumper's was fastened to his belt, I saw, and it's smashed. Plenty of water within a quarter mile, as I know—rock cistern. Where are your horses?"

"He left 'em below, just under the ledge."

"I'll go get mine and ride around and come into the canyon" Ratch said. "Here, take my side gun—not that you'll need it. Stay here till I get back. We'll put Jumper's body across his saddle, water up, and then hit for home. Sarah will be worryin' and waitin'."

POWDERSMOKE PAY-OFF

(Concluded from page 144)

outs all over the West. It seems incredible, but he loved her dearly. It was his one redeeming virture. Then, after one of his escapades, she followed him over the Border. There she contracted smallpox and died."

The girl choked, drew a deep breath and continued. "He swore above her dead body he would never handle a gun again. He changed his name, grew a beard to cover that giveaway scar, and became as ardent an evangelist as he had been a lawbreaker. We came north. Here, in Antelope Valley, I found my first real happiness—until that man Boulderson recognized Dad."

She began to cry quietly, deep sobs shaking her slim shoulders. Willoughby lifted her as if she were a child and held her tightly in his arms.

"Is the law satisfied?" He icily surveyed Harris over his wife's shoulder.

"It's nothing more than a bad dream now, dear," Willoughby told his wife quietly. "Now you are really going to enjoy life. Let's ride out to the ranch. I have great plans for the CCC. And by the way, Sheriff, various consignees at Kansas City stockyards are withholding remittances for OOO shipments, upon my telegraphic instructions. That beef belongs to the CCC and I intend to take legal steps to recover its value."

"So thet's why he tied up with Carlos," commented Harris with a grim smile, as the footsteps of the Englishman and his wife died away outside. "I dunno which was slicker!"

"Say, yuh ain't said how yuh got next tuh Pete," rumbled Bull.

The sheriff dug a musty reward dodger out of a drawer. It bore the likeness of a hatchet-faced young man with deep-set, penetrating eyes. His jaw was disfigured by a deep bullet scar.

"Pete, without the whiskers," he said. Bull scanned the dodger:

$1,000 REWARD
WANTED—DEAD OR ALIVE

Pete Pryor, notorious gunman. Age 26. Height 5'8". Weight 150. Hair black. Eyes dark. Blue scar along jawbone, left side. Wanted for murder of cashier, Peace River Bank, Ute, Texas, and theft of $20,000 gold. Also killing of James Hide, deputy sheriff. This man is dangerous—shoot on sight.

WILLIAM BOULDERSON
Sheriff, Ute County

"I never got Pete tuh rights," drawled Harris, sliding down comfortably into his swivel chair, "till I lamped his gun in the cabin. No trigger. Doctored fer slip shootin'." He dipped into a drawer, pitched a Colt .45 on the desk. "Look at it! A professional gunman's iron. And thet neat pattern he made on Carlos' chest, it jest warn't preacherlike. Thet set me tuh wonderin' why he sprouted a beard. Mebbe he had somethin' tuh hide. So I shaved the jasper tuh find out. The scar was a giveaway. Ten minutes' shufflin' through old reward dodgers hung the deadwood on him."

Bull hefted the worn six-gun curiously. "The preacher's payoff," he rumbled.

"Powdersmoke payoff!" snapped 'Pache.

THE TRAIL BOSS

(Continued from page 9)

Meantime all sorts of people began to pour into the young Republic. Many were plain adventurers lured by the glowing promise of an exciting life in the battle-scarred new land. Others were solid settlers, cotton farmers from the south eager to move where land to plant their crops could be had for a song. And some like young John Chisum still in his teens were shrewd business men from the start, though they could ride a horse as well as the wildest of the gun-hellions.

Chisum was certainly not a lead-slinger, but he brooked no nonsense from those that were, and was always capable of looking after himself, and his business interests. From the start the man was literally and figuratively a builder—and a money maker. As a corollary he was also a hard worker.

Chisum Had Vision

While still a young man John Chisum laid out the site of Paris on his own land, helped build the first house in the new town, and then becoming a contractor and builder as the town grew, he built the first county courthouse there.

This is a side of John Chisum, the cattle king of the Southwest, that is not so generally known, or written about. Yet it gives as true a picture of the type of pioneer Chisum really was as any of his later and more publicized cattle baron exploits. Chisum had visions of a grown-up Texas from the start. And he did much with his own hands as well as his brains to make that dream come true.

It was not until 1854 that John Chisum, contractor, went into the cattle business making several drives to Shreveport, Louisiana with his longhorns. From Shreveport the cattle were shipped by steamboat down the Red and the Mississippi rivers to such cities as Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez and New Orleans.

Afterwards for better range Chisum moved his stock and his cattle business to the Concho river in Concho county in 1863.

Empty Land

Four years later, with increasing American settlement in such towns as Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Albuquerque and El Paso as well as in Trinidad, Colorado and distant Denver, Chisum figured the empty range land of south central New Mexico, free for the taking by anyone who was man enough to grab it up and stay there, would be a good business move for himself and his growing herds of rangy longhorns. It would be a central spot for many as yet untapped beef markets, and in addition he would be headquartered closer to the delivery point for the profitable contracts available for supplying large quantities of beef to Indian reservations and the Government's Army forts and outposts in far reaches of the Southwest.

That, and not love of adventure was what prompted Chisum to make his historic trek and cattle drive to the Pecos river country north of present Roswell, New Mexico. Other economic factors prompted the move too.

Following the Civil War, Texas' former southern city cattle markets were for a time more or less literally wiped out. In Texas the price of range cattle had dropped until millions of head could be bought for $1 apiece —with no takers.

The Dawn of Railroading

Chisum decided to do something about it besides moaning. He determined to move where the markets, and the Army beef contracts were. Besides he had an eye on the new Union Pacific railroad, just completed across the country.

It was, he foresaw, not simply a single line but the forerunner of other transcontinental railroads as well.

So John Chisum, builder and cattle king, moved to New Mexico. And became as far as most people are concerned just a bit player in the fast-moving, infinitely more exciting, gun-blazing drama of the West's most famous outlaw—Billy the Kid. History does that sometimes, remembering its colorful characters more easily than men of solid worth. Yet every grassfat Blaze Face on the Western range today is in a way proof of the soundness of Chisum's dream that someday the West would run the kind of beef cattle that could be sold by the pound rather than by the head.

Trail Hands, that brings to mind a thought that maybe all of us might do well to remember. Though few are destined to make the

world a better place to live in, all of us can do our part to prevent it from becoming worse. And that's the truth.

—THE TRAIL BOSS.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

SOME humdingers are coming up in the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN, folks, and we're not just wagging our jaws for the sake of exercise, or whatever. To prove it, take a squint at the tally sheet for that next issue and draw your own conclusions.

First off, William MacLeod Raine will be back again and this time with a novel called THE DESERT'S PRICE, which we rank right up there among the best of the many grand, two-fisted books that have made Raine easily one of the most celebrated Western authors of the day. The other two novels, THE HARD RIDERS, by Tom J. Hopkins, and BOSS OF THE TUMBLING M, by B. M. Bower, of Flying U fame, will team up with it fine, we think. Leastwise, they were selected from literally hundreds of other Western books in an effort to give you the best that's to be had in reading entertainment.

Now let's take a glance or two at what's to be found in these novels we've been shouting about.

THE DESERT'S PRICE is chiefly concerned with the troubles of Wilson McCann, better known as "Wils", and if ever there was a cowboy who had more troubles, we haven't crossed his trail in quite a spell. As the most sprightly of the McCann tribe, the Stark family and its Circle Cross riders had kept a wary eye on him long before Tom McArdle turned up dead in a gully with a bullet where his belt-plate should have been.

But meantime, Wils had met Julia Stark, the prettiest gal in all of Arizona, or so it was claimed by old Jim Yerby who occasioned their meeting by busting his leg in the desolate wastes of Painted Desert which bordered the two great spreads of McCann and Stark. It was Julia who found old Jim where he lay, and it was Wils who answered her distress shots to set the oldtimer's broken leg.

Julia had been away to school for a number of years and so neither recognized the other. Both liked what they saw, too, until their identities became known. Then, of course, the inborn hatred of a Stark for a

[*Turn page*]

McCann and vice versa came between them.

Other things of a more concrete nature were also to come between them, as the event of Wils beating up Julia's weakling brother, Jasper, was swiftly followed by the proclamation of her father, Matt Stark, that he meant to kill Wils McCann on sight.

And then to top things off, Julia was among the Circle Cross contingent who heard shots and rode over to find Wils McCann bent over the body of her father, a rifle in his hand. That Wils was badly wounded himself was probably the only thing that saved him. Though this obviously didn't lessen Julia's damning thoughts of him, it was at her insistence that they bring him in and tend his wounds as they would those of any human being.

Because Matt Stark had publicly announced his intention of killing him on sight, Wils could not be held by Arizona law. But the Circle Cross was not the law and they meant to avenge old Matt's death fully, despite Wils McCann's flat statement that he hadn't been the one who'd killed him. Only Julia believed him, deep down and maddeningly against her will. But because she was a Stark and loyal to the memory of her father, she could not have openly admitted it even if she'd wanted to.

Many other interesting characters are woven into this absorbing story and so skillfully that you'll never guess their bearing upon the murders until the final shocking outcome is made clear before your eyes. Among these perhaps Dave Stone, a silent Texan who kept his eyes open, and the three pretty Gifford sisters who inherited a sheep ranch adjoining the feuding ranches, are the most notable.

We predict you'll enjoy THE DESERT'S PRICE as much if not more than any book you've ever read by that past-master of Western fiction, William MacLeod Raine.

The second novel, THE HARD RIDERS, is a fast-paced story filled with the blare and flash of shooting irons. It deals with as tough a pair of hard riders as you'll ever meet in Yakima Raeburn and his pal, Slim, who take a leave from prison to help Yakima's son from getting caught in the same kind of squeeze that had kept them behind bars for twenty years.

Their prison leave wasn't exactly official. The warden knew nothing about it, in fact, until too late. As it happened, they were working in the prison garden outside the gates and almost midway between the two guard towers on that side, each with its deadly Gatling gun, when the harsh command of a guard came down to them:

"Sundown, you two trusties. Cut off the irrigation water and come in!"

Yakima and Slim, who for years had been known only as numbers 7234 and 7235, shifted their eyes briefly to the blaze of the low-hanging sun, then glanced at one another and nodded. They waved at the guards and walked calmly toward the gates in the flume.

They walked the twenty steps to the flume quietly, the guards watching them. They stopped and reached down to drop the wooden gates that cut off the flow of water in the flume. They laid down their hoes, stretched—and suddenly leaped the flume and raced toward the river and the setting sun.

One guard bawled a wild order. A second took it up, then a third. They cursed and shouted as they peered into the blinding glare of the sun. All they could do was shoot straight into the sun and hope that some of their rapidly flung bullets would find a mark.

7234 and 7235 ran on. Behind them there was tumult. Guns, whistles, rifles, and the big alarm bell made their din. Men with rifles were dropping from the walls, others running for the gates.

The river was in flood and the ugly booming sound of it dulled all else as Yakima and Slim reached the ten-foot cutbank above the flood and jumped. As they hit the sand they saw the river boiling madly through the channel. It carried debris and bodies, but the two men wavered only a moment as they stared about them. Yes, it was there, waiting—a six-foot log tied to one end of a long rope.

Which is the way Yakima and Slim chose to quit the gray stone walls that had held them confined for so long, unjustly. But it was only the beginning of many such tense, bullet-filled moments for the pair as they rode straight into the thick of the Bloody Valley range war.

Yakima's son was young enough that he did not remember his father, and he could not quite figure why his mother was so set against the gun aid which these two hardbitten riders offered him and the other small ranchers of Bloody Valley against Kill Kellman, the all-powerful land baron who was trying to crowd them out. The woman, of course, fearing that in openly making a stand

with guns, her son would wind up either dead or in prison, as her husband had, could not really be blamed for her attempts to discourage cold-out warfare.

But there was a time for guns and even the woman realized it as the ruthlessness of Kellman became more and more apparent. To further complicate things, Yakima's son was hopelessly in love with the lovely daughter of Isaac Sellers, a townman whose collaboration with Kellman was obvious but never completely understood.

If you like truly exciting reading, THE HARD RIDERS, by Tom J. Hopkins, will give it to you in large and frequent doses. We'll stack this yarn against any for pure thrills, and that's a fact.

B. M. Bower needs no introduction to Western readers. Probably best remembered for CHIP OF THE FLYING U, this author has published numerous other books acclaimed for their down-to-earth characterizations of life on the range. It wasn't all gunplay and wild riding and three fingers of redeye. There was work aplenty, too, hard work and trouble. And if the trouble didn't come from the elements in the form of snow, flood, or droughts, it came from your neighbor or the men cast adrift in this untamed land who also had to eat to keep alive.

In BOSS OF THE TUMBLING M, the Bower novel which we are privileged to give you in the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN, the troubles of young Ed Mason will seem as your own, so vividly and realistically are

[Turn page]

they portrayed. And after riding through the pages with him, his triumphs will be yours, too. If ever you can be transported back to the days of the old West by the mere reading of a book, BOSS OF THE TUMBLING M will do it.

Ed Mason's uncle was a state senator who spent most of his time in the capital city, so when Ed professed an interest in his ranch, the elderly man was delighted.

"Go to it," he told him. "And as soon as you learn what there is to know you can take over as foreman. I've a good man running things for me now, Jack Roseburg, but I see no reason to make him my heir."

And so it was that Ed Mason came to the Tumbling M, after being sidetracked and sent in the opposite direction by old man Rhodes and his daughters—five of them, no less—who could ride and rope and shoot like men.

Jack Roseburg was all man. There could be no slightest doubt about that. Whether a good man or a bad one was a horse of another color, however. Ed couldn't figure him. He seemed level as a gun barrel. Yet each time some neighboring ranch would report a large number of their finest saddle stock missing, Jack Roseburg would be off somewhere on one of his mysterious rides.

To add to the confusion in Ed's mind was the unfriendliness of the Rhodes outfit with whom Roseburg seemed to hold some strange tie, as well as the suspicious appearing Rip Van Hooten. Van Hooten wore a steel leg brace that extended below the boot of one foot, and when Ed Mason saw Roseburg furtively scuff out marks of that brace in the trail of some stolen stock they were following, new doubts bore heavily on him.

You'll get some surprises at the way this fine novel turns out, though. We think you'll enjoy every line of it, so look forward to BOSS OF THE TUMBLING M and the other two thrilling novels in the next TRIPLE WESTERN. There will of course be the usual

entertaining features and top short stories in that next issue as well. A lot of prime reading!

FROM OUR READERS

JOHNNIE HAZZON, from down Tucson way, starts the letter ball for this issue rolling with the following interesting missive.

Your article "Six Shooterology" has stood the old timers in Tucson on their ear, so to speak. It has been the cause of a number of arguments and near battles in the Santa Rita and Congress bars. Several residents of this town have heard of at least two of the incidents—Wyatt Earp shooting the jack at 400 yards and Wild Bill Hickok driving a cork through the neck of a bottle without breaking the neck—though of course we didn't know the true facts involved till we read the article. Most of us are willing to accept the author's version, but it is those dissenting few that have made for some interesting moments in the aforementioned gathering places. *Hasta la vista.*

Thanks for your nice letter, Johnnie. Whenever we publish an article on some legendary figure for incident of the Old West, there are always those to step up and say it ain't so. And the strange part of it is that they could be right. We weren't there, granted, and have only the best historical data at our command in which to believe. But even historians can occasionally err, and at this late date, who actually knows what occurred? Like they say—it's a difference of opinion that makes a horserace.

And now from East Chicago a nice little note from Wil Thomley:

TRIPLE WESTERN is my favorite magazine. Don't get me wrong, but how about more stories of the very old days of the West, pre-cattle era, with covered wagons and Injun fights et al? Them's fer me.

We like 'em, too, Wil, when they're good, and have our eye on a couple right now which we hope to get for TRIPLE WESTERN readers before too long. Maybe you missed the October issue in which there was a crackerjack Injun-fighting yarn, BUCKSKIN BRIGADE, by L. Ron Hubbard, and if so,

[*Turn page*]

you might still be able to latch onto a copy somewhere.

Erle Bates, of Tampa, Florida, writes:

I don't think I ever enjoyed a story more than I did HOPALONG CASSIDY AND THE EAGLE'S BROOD, by Clarence Mulford, in your October issue. Let's have more by Mulford and Raine and Max Brand, who could only be called tops in their field by anyone anywhere at any time. Furthermore, I'm prepared to back up this statement with water pistols at ten paces if need be.

Hold your fire, Erle, for we agree wholeheartedly. As proof of which, leave us point out the fact that another William MacLeod Raine saga, THE DESERT'S PRICE, will grace the pages of our next issue. Also, there'll be more by Brand and Mulford coming up in the near future.

And that about does it for this trip, folks. Please drop us a card or letter when you get the chance, addressed to The Editor, TRIPLE WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y., and we'll see what we'll see. Seriously, we do enjoy hearing from you and learning your opinions of the magazine. Be seeing you, and thanks to everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

BROTHERHOOD WEEK

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AN EASTERN philosopher once wrote, "I met a hundred men on my way to Delhi and all of them were my brothers." If all over the world we could get this feeling into our hearts there would no longer be any racial, religious, or national antagonisms. For each of us this is an individual problem. My first responsibility is to know that I Bill Raine, look at my neighbors without regard to color or creed, with no inner smugness and with the knowledge that we are part of a great world brotherhood. I do not think tolerance is enough. The word implies a patient indulgence of opinions and practices that differ from our own. We must try to reach a sympathetic understanding.

If one really knows a man or a race prejudices vanish. Charles Lamb once put his finger on this truth. Somebody wanted to introduce him to a man he did not like. Lamb said he did not want to meet him because if he knew the man he would begin to like him.

—WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE.

THE BEAR FACTS

Why the Navajos Won't Hunt Ursine Prey

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

CAN you imagine a Navajo Indian asking a white man to do his hunting for him? That's just what's been going on for years at the Navajo Indians' Reservation in Arizona, a sportsman's paradise.

It isn't that the Navajos have lost their skill for hunting. If anything they are better today with the rifle than their forefathers were with bow and arrow. Nor is it that the game isn't worth hunting. In fact bear meat is considered quite tasty by most Indians and the Navajo Reservation is overrun with destructive bears just begging to be bagged.

But it seems that according to the teachings of the Navajo medicine men, bears aren't really bears. They are an earthly form of ghosts, specifically the ghosts of the tribesmen's grandmothers. When a grandmother dies she returns to continue her guardianship over her grandchildren in the form of a bear. Naturally, the Navajos are reluctant to shoot bears for fear of harming their grandmothers' ghosts.

However, the bears are getting more pesty each year. In 1944, for instance, they destroyed several hundred sheep and ruined upward of 1000 acres of corn and wheat and beets.

Though the Navajos would like to hunt bears, they must limit themselves to lesser game. And there is a standing invitation to white folk to come out and shoot "grandmothers"—that is, bears. Seems the grandmother-ghost curse is only effective against Indians!

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CALVIN SKINNER of New Orleans, La., tells us he makes $5 to $10 in spare time repairing radios. He is now also working with a Television set.

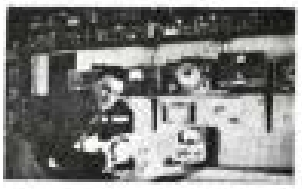
LOREN D. SAUCIER of Colonia, Mich., reports that my training has made it possible for him to repair large numbers of Radio and Television sets.

How is the Time to Get Into This Fast Growing Industry—Prepare for a Fine Paying Job or Your Own Business!

I have trained hundreds of men to become technicians—and I'm ready to do the same for you. Whether your goal is a fine paying job in one of Radio's many branches—or a successful Radio and Television business of your own—you need the kind of training I offer! My training is practical and down to earth. YOU NEED NO PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE. I start you with basic fundamentals and give you plenty of practical shop-bench training with many kits of parts I send you. This is the training that sticks with you and makes money for you on the job!

GET PAID FOR SPARE TIME WHILE LEARNING

Soon after you start training I send you my famous BUSINESS BUILDERS that show you how to make money in spare time doing interesting Radio jobs. I send you 8 big kits of Radio parts and equipment and help you build step-by-step a powerful 6-tube superhet radio, a 16-range test meter, plus other mighty useful equipment for Radio and Television servicing. You will perform over 175 fascinating experiments while training. You will learn about Television—so that you will be qualified to step into this fast growing, profitable field. I also send you many valuable service manuals, diagrams, and my book telling exactly how to set up your own Television and Radio shop. Clip and mail the coupon below for my two big FREE Radio books. I employ no salesmen—and nobody will call on you.



HAVE A BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN

A profitable Radio and Television Service Shop may be started with little capital. I will show you how to get started. At left is pictured one of my graduates, Mr. Merrit C. Sperry, Fairmont, Minn. in his own shop.

Radio and Television Industry Booming

You couldn't pick a better time to get into Radio-Television and Electronics. New Television stations are going on the air to serve every major city—hundreds of new AM and FM Radio broadcasting stations are also on the air. All this creates new and bigger opportunities for the trained man who knows Radio-Television and Electronics.

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in
SPRINGFIELD ILL.

W. R. SEEFELDT says "I switched to Calvert long ago. I believe in moderation," he adds, "and Calvert's milder taste makes it the ideal whiskey for me."

and
SPRINGFIELD O.

THOMAS McGUFF, plumber, insists on s-m-o-o-t-h-n-e-s-s in his drinks. That's why he switched. "Calvert always tastes the same," he says, "smoother, better-tasting."

and
SPRINGFIELD MASS.

ANTONIO GIANNETI is a barber but he doesn't want to be clipped. "So I switched to Calvert because its better taste makes it a better buy for *my* money."

and
SPRINGFIELD MO.

RAY G. HOLMES, a good chef, knows the importance of *taste*. So he always serves Calvert Reserve. "Now more and more of my friends have joined the big switch."

Everywhere ... Every Day... More and More Wise Folks Say–

It's Smart to Switch to
Calvert

Lighter...Smoother...Tastes Better

CHOICE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN
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